

UNTANGLING THE RELEVANCE OF SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION FOR PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

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Abstract

Sociology of education is an outgrowth of sociology, whose origins date to the turn of the 20th century. Sociology is described as the study of institutions and institutional life while sociology of education has as one of its aims to provide an understanding of the system of institutions and how life and learning in them varies. This paper is premised on the context that sociology of education has low visibility in a higher education sector increasingly directed towards narrow vocational preparation. The theoretical insight indicated that sociology of education is a practical theory for placing learners in a space or field where factors which push some learners to an elevated “fortified” part of “success” and others to where learners are “exposed” to failure. On the relevance of sociology of education, this paper explained that sociology of education is the study of the relationships of all stakeholders in education to social institutions of society. Thus teachers and students do not function in a vacuum, but in the social relationships of their milieu. Therefore, sociology is of profound importance to a pre-service teacher.

Keywords: *Sociology of Education, Pre-Service Teachers*

Introduction

Sociology of Education is a course offered in Teacher Education programme as part of requirement for the award of degree in teaching. The course is offered at advanced teacher institution as well. It is a course often mired in the controversy of relevance among pre-service teachers, educators and curriculum planners. The relevance of sociology of education is regularly raised among curriculum developers and in recent time, the course has been neglected in the curriculum allocation. The subject matter in this paper is to draw attention of pre-service teachers to the relevance of this course through describing the bond between the Sociology and Sociology of Education. A theoretical insight is offered while stating the place of sociology of education in the scheme of teacher education programme. The aforementioned is to aid in highlighting the relevance of Sociology of Education for pre-service teachers before drawing a conclusion on the subject matter.

Bonding Sociology and Sociology of Education

Sociology of education is an outgrowth of sociology, whose origins dated to the turn of the 20th century. Sociology as a field of study was institutionalized and recognized as an academic discipline at the University of Kansas in 1890. After a year, the school established the Department of History and Sociology. Many students showed interest in this branch of Social Sciences, which led to the establishment of University of Chicago's Department of Sociology in 1892. The first professional Association of Sociologists was established in 1893 by Rene Worms.

Sociology is an interesting field of study as it focuses on the application of systematic methodologies in interpreting different phenomena that usually happen in societies. Sociologists are knowledgeable in having comprehensive understanding of concepts, elements and phenomena. Sociology provides an intensive look at humanity. Many countries have come to value individuals who are knowledgeable about this field because they provide useful and unbiased information and outlooks on interesting social events and issues.

In general, sociology is the study of people in groups, or more specifically, the study of human societies and social interaction. Sociologists sometimes describe their field as the study of social structures and institutions, and the processes that bring the structures and institutions alive. Education and schools are but one institution of society; others include family, religion, politics, economics, and health. Sociologists did not begin systematically studying educational institutions until the 1950s. Prior to that time, sociological studies in education were few in number and were largely based on anecdotal evidences and value judgments, and avoided the more controversial aspects of teaching and learning.

Even though the sociology of education emerged more recently than some academic disciplines, it has grown exponentially in the last several decades. As a field, the diversity of theoretical perspectives, levels of analyses, and questions asked make it impossible to define Sociology of Education singularly. Unlike many academic disciplines, the sociology of education is a relatively new field of study. Despite its short history, however, it is a rich and diverse field. Sociologists of education study a variety of topics, using a variety of theoretical approaches and methodologies. Unlike educational psychologists who study the relationship between learning and an individual student's mental processes (e.g. memory, attention, and perception). Also sociologists of education are interested in the relationship between learning and variables outside the individual's control - such as family background,

gender, access to resources, and social class. Sociologists of education also study education as a social institution, and its relationship to other institutions of the society in general.

Place of Sociology of Education in Teacher Education Programme

According to the National Universities Commission (NUC), the Benchmark Minimum Academic Standards (BMAS) for all Nigerian Universities, pre-service teachers at the first year of education programme are expected to be taught Sociological Concepts as one of the topics for two hours under the course, Foundations of Education (EDU 112). This is a rain (2nd) semester course and the topic on sociology is an introduction to major sociological ideas which have influence on education. In the second year, pre-service teachers offer a course in the harmattan (1st) semester titled, Sociology of Education which is 2units and compulsory. In a nutshell, for a four-year degree, pre-service teachers get 32hours of lecture on sociology of education. It should be noted that most pre-service teachers enter the programme with no background of the course and unaware of the divisions within sociology (Funnell, 2010). Unlike Psychology, Sociology lacked the professional opportunities and public status which form the criteria for recruitment which are supported by a recognized professional deontology (duty-based ethics). There were then, as now, limited career enticements for studying sociology or becoming a Sociologist of education.

The position of Marshall, Robinson, Germov and Clark (2009) was that sociologists of education and other pre-service university staff enter a part of the field where, as they can be “invisible” sociologists teaching an “invisible” sociology. But this is not limited to Nigerian universities as Sociologists of education in other climes also suffer similar fate. Marshall, et.al (2009) also noted that sociology of education has low visibility in a higher education sector increasingly directed towards narrow vocational preparation and few education courses. In this ways, Sociologists of Education are faced with a possible challenge with a pressing problem as what to teach and how to teach the course in the thirty-two hours available in teacher education programme. Thus, making sociology of education conceptually sound and relevant to teacher education programme becomes pedagogically challenging.

Pre-Service Teachers and Sociology of Education

According to Lauder, Brown, and Halsey (2009), pre-service teachers are limited in their capacity to work from theory to a substantive level as is

expected when sociology is studied as a major. In assessment, pre-service teachers within the field of social sciences education such as social studies education, economics education, geography education, and political science education, and so on, can play an academic game, but the more practically oriented students are less inclined to do so; especially pre-service teachers in educational technology and sciences-based education programmes who fondly refer to their social science courses as “rubbish”. For these reasons, Rata (2010) stated that sociologists of education need to ensure that their teachings focus on methods for understanding particular educational phenomenon, concepts that force all students to work empirically on data about particular educational issue rather than on theoretical generalisations, and finally on assessment which strips away advantages of previous cultural capital.

A central intent in the sociology of education is to differentiate between individual/psychological and social/structural explanations of educational phenomena. Relations between individual teachers and students are, for example, at the centre of teaching. But this relationship, and the success of teaching and the quality of educational outcomes, are very much influenced by the type of institutions in which individuals come to interact and by structural and other conditions outside of the school (Connell, 2004). Combined, these social and structural factors determine variations across learners in the classroom, which are often beyond the direct control of individual teachers and learners. It is for this reason that pre-service teachers require a clear understanding of the pressure of factors within and outside of schools as institutions that shape one learner in one way and another learner in a different way.

Always at issue in pre-service teacher programs are questions of how to frame “theoretical” courses so that they can be taught as 'practical theory' in response to students who may lack a motivation to engage with them. Most students have an interest in the practical aspects of their degree. In a nutshell, the challenge in social sciences education courses is to situate students so that they can understand, practically, how a sociological explanation differs from a psychological explanation of what will be faced in practice.

According to Mathews (2013), Durkheim believed that an education system was only as good as its teachers and without the critical self-consciousness of 'pedagogic', teachers were doomed to the mindless and mechanical repetition of their own education. Pedagogy for Durkheim was the practical theory of education and an intermediary between art and science. It was not limited to the technical skills it commonly references today. Durkheim understood that teachers and educators must be researchers and that

disciplines and fields of study were immaterial because there is only the investigation of how education has been in the past, why it is as it is in the present and what it could become in the future (Mathews, 2013). By so doing, the focus of the sociology of education has evolved from the nature and role of schooling and schools has expanded to encompass non-institutional processes and practices. Its fundamental concern with questions of schooling, meritocracy and inequality remain, but its objects of study have expanded beyond the realm of schools and teachers to address educational processes and practices in almost every sphere of life. Of interest to the discipline are questions concerning education and cultural diversity, environmental sustainability, family relations, gender and sexuality, globalisation, internationalisation, knowledge and epistemology, leadership, learning communities and networks, lifelong and workplace learning, literacy, curriculum and pedagogy, teachers work and popular culture.

Theoretical Insight

In the course of breeding understanding on this topic, it was indicated that pre-service teachers commence their degree with little or no grounding in social sciences, hence, the employability of sociological concepts to construct an understanding of education in a single semester course. In addition, the differences in background experiences, a diverse socialisation into their teaching disciplines often means low motivation to engage with “theory” courses that are not grounded in preferred areas. Also, there is a need for pre-service teachers to understand differences between individual, psychological and social, structural phenomena. An important question is whether this approach provides necessary theoretical insights?

Given that universities cannot teach all individuals in the society, the course gives something of a number of points of view from various points within the system and of how classrooms are grouped within social and geographical space. Students have an understanding of what factors force different parts of the system away from each other and structural reasons for how and why this happens, and how failure and success are not solely about individual teachers and individual students. A key issue for the sociology of education is not necessarily how to secure sociological or educational disciplinary integrity, but how to advance its extensive interdisciplinary research agenda through an educational imagination able to connect education to social complexity and multiple theoretical and analytical positions.

Relevance of Sociology of Education for Pre-Service Teachers

Since sociology of education is the study of the social relationships of all stakeholders in education. Teachers and students do not function in a vacuum, but in the social relationships of their milieu. Therefore, sociology is of profound importance to a pre-service teacher. To start with, on four different levels, the individual, the classroom, the school, and the community, a good working knowledge of sociology of education for a pre-service teacher prepares a solid ground to become an effective teacher.

1. A good teacher needs to understand how his or her own students' sociological backgrounds have an impact on their educational experience. Students come from a variety of social backgrounds, and in order to connect and engage with each student, the teacher must have some understanding of those backgrounds. This enables the teacher to best tailor learning to meet each student's particular needs. If knowledge is power, the more that a teacher knows about what affects students' learning, the more the teacher can bring to bear on giving them the best educational experience they can have.
2. The teacher is also functioning in a social organization, the school and the entire school district. The culture of the school and/or the district has a great bearing upon the teaching environment. A teacher needs to attend to the sociology of the classroom as an organizational entity.
3. The teacher is empowered by having insight into the social environment of the school and the school district. The teacher needs to understand how the school district fits into the social makeup of the community. Parents may be active participants in school matters or be completely content to leave it all up to the schools. The culture of the district can thus have a large effect up the everyday life of the teacher and the teacher's effectiveness in the classroom.
4. In order to create a classroom community, the teacher has to have some understanding of sociology. How the students coalesce as a group or do not coalesce as a group is to a large degree a function of the classroom as a sociological organism. The teacher with some awareness can arrange for groups or pairings that will enable students to forge connections.
5. The teacher can inculcate an environment of respect for differences, be they cultural, religious, ethnic, or gender by modeling his or her respect for all differences.

6. Some understanding of sociology helps the teacher to see what might be going wrong in the classroom, as students do not behave properly or do not get along, for example.
7. The teacher needs to understand the efficacy and the shortcomings of the bureaucracy. The teacher needs to understand where power lies in the organization, in order to navigate through the system effectively. This kind of understanding may prove to be the difference between getting or not getting additional resources for the students.
8. To better teach students. There are many social factors that shape students and their learning, and that also influence the type of interactions found within a school. If the school is overwhelmingly made up of students that are poverty-stricken, from separated parent families, unsure of the next meal, that may affect their learning. If the school is overwhelmingly made up of students who have their own personal computers, who are accustomed to having many books in the house, or whose parents are quite stable, then that may affect learning. By studying sociology, future educators can “dive in” to the many factors that they may face in educating their students.
9. It helps teachers reach students more effectively when the teachers are aware of the social influences that are affecting their students. For example, if the community shares certain values about education, socially accepted roles, prejudices, biases, and expectations, then not knowing those things puts the teachers at a disadvantage.
10. The influence of social class status will affect the students' access to information and learning resources. Some people will argue that the ease of access to information is so universal as to render this consideration meaningless, but they may want to consider the quality of that information before they decide that it is available to everyone in the same way.
11. Knowing the students' living conditions and the social influences of the community can help teachers and administrators shape the programs and offerings that are available to the students. Sociology of education is one tool for acquiring and processing the information.

Conclusion

Across the globe, education depicts a fundamentally optimistic human endeavor, often reflected in the aspirations for progress and betterment but also filled with contradictions. It is arguably a means of surmounting handicaps, reaching greater equality, realizing social mobility in the acquisition of wealth and social status. Argumentatively, the purpose of education is to develop every individual to their full potential, and give them a chance to achieve as much in life as their natural abilities allow (meritocracy) but few educational system accomplishes this goal perfectly. Some critics contend that the education system is designed with the intention of causing the social reproduction of inequality.

The place of sociology of education is to breed understanding into this contrasting paradigm by providing the platforms, tools and research analysis to comprehend the phenomenon of schooling, teaching, learning and the environment that harbors. The study of sociology of education offers pre-service teachers broader perspectives to reach learners effectively as they become aware of the social influences that are affecting students.

If sociology is the study of institutions and institutional life, then the sociology of education should have as one of its aims to provide an understanding of the system of institutions and how life and learning in them varies across schools. And as a part of this, should come a further understanding: that the capacity to become an effective teacher in a pre-service program depends on a practical knowledge of what it means to teach in the various types of institutions in different places in the system. Given this, a sociology of education must entail the analysis of institutions that interact with education, and a sociology course has to be situated in the part of the program where students can reflect on their experiences of a practicum and working with the curriculum.

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