

Elite Ideological Advocacy: Perspectives on Neo-Marxian Theory on Education in Zimbabwe

by

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Abstract

The educational system in Zimbabwe is shaped and defined by the neo-Marxist principle of viewing the education system as an extension of the bourgeoisie ethics and morals in line with their definition of pedagogic relevance. Hence, the curriculum is designed to suit and communicate the intents and purposes of the bourgeoisie for the subjugation of the struggling proletariat. In this paper, the writer deliberates on the possibilities of Zimbabwean education being influenced by capitalist enterprises through a critical survey of selected theoretical frameworks encompassing feminism, interactionism, and functionalism.

Key Words: curriculum, education, neo-Marxism, Zimbabwe, bourgeoisie, proletariat.

Introduction

Education is a term used inclusively to denote both the formal and informal indoctrination of academic concepts, ideas, theories to people, but ideologically and conceptually mediocre, in preparation, especially for future occupational or societal placement. This education includes the hidden curriculum meant to assimilate and adjust to their teachers' codes of social expectations, as a process of their grooming, if they are guided into the professional environment.

This study is set to revolve around Karl Marx's theory via a neo-Marxist approach that views society as pivoted on the economic strength and autonomy of the individuals concerned. Neo-Marxism can be defined as a term loosely applied to any social theory or sociological analysis which draws on the ideas of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, but amends or extends them by incorporating elements from other intellectual traditions such as psychoanalysis, Weberian sociology, or anarchism (Marshall and Scott 2005). Placing the neo-Marxist theory in a Zimbabwean setting, this paper is mandated to ravel an investigatory insight into the nature of the Zimbabwean education system infringing bourgeoisie ethics and values. It also surveys the multifarious treatments directed towards a variety of stratified classes within education where the less privileged are destined to suffer lifelong disadvantages in their attempts to reach at goals set beyond their social, economic and academic circles – obviously at socio-economic zones where attempting is an ill-advised endeavor.

Methodology

This work adopts a qualitative approach, and it takes as its core techniques of data collection, the employment of interviews, observation and document analysis. As for the information in this paper, besides having read some related commending documents on the Zimbabwean educational manipulations and categorical hassles, the writer is an insider (a Zimbabwean among the less privileged fellows) that heavily made use of his intuitive knowledge and experience to bring to light some of the issues that mark the educational divisions and imbalances in a Zimbabwean setting. Thus, observatory engagements, opinion, and face-to-face interviews marked the benefiting basic forms of gathering the needed data for this paper.

Theoretical Base

This study also benefits from French sociologist Bourdieu's 1974 ideology of cultural reproduction which refers to the various ways the cultures of the haves are maintained or reproduced by the education system (Gwirayi 2010). This embodies the ideological mechanisms affecting society and the education system in which the higher classes are in control of everything, with the education sector being part of the most targeted and dominated of institutions. Marking a summative closure to the concept under scrutiny, Ritzer (2007) unravels the following elaborative that:

Cultural reproduction is frequently considered to describe how cultural forms (e.g., social inequality, privilege, elite status, ethnicity) and cultures themselves are transmitted intact, from one generation to another. This idea emanates strongly from original work by Pierre Bourdieu in the 1970s on the role of the education process in reproducing class inequality and from such ethnographic classics as Paul Willis's Learning to Labour (1977) that showed how inequality could be reproduced culturally despite the best efforts of a benevolent education system.

In this light, the economically muscled classes are piercingly audible voices and have the power and confidence to air their views with very little or no regard on their ideas' far-reaching impact upon the general public. Indisputably, the privileged classes translate themselves as the owners and manipulators of the education system in whose ethics lie manifest the projected route the education system is inexorably bound to trail. Thus, the theory insists on the self-given administrative prowess and domineering ambiance attained through affluence that impulsively guide the management and administration of education systems concerned, despite the firm and unyielding academic and administrative standards ostensibly democratic from different schools.

Neo-Marxian Grounding

From a neo-Marxian perspective, society is made up of social classes that differ in significant ways. Those varied social groups are further differentiated by the quality of education that they attain since education is a major distinguishing feature that marks the dichotomy between the rich and the poor. From a Marxist view point, tracing its relevance to a Zimbabwean setting, it is the child's social class which determines failure or success at school. This is so because of the social and economic stratifications that exists in Zimbabwe's societies and academic arenas. In this line of thought, Gwirayi (2010) says:

According to Max, there is unequal distribution of resources in society. This is quite evident if one looks at the different schools in our society. In Zimbabwe, elite or former Group A schools are the most equipped, with some surpassing even teachers' colleges and universities. This is in sharp contrast with the situation in rural schools, which experience acute and continuous shortage of resources.

Thus, considering the vast potential of accumulating material resources that communities of the “haves” have, elites students are likely to attain better academic results compared to those of poor backgrounds. Thus, students have no money for extra lessons, have no private teachers at home, have no money for better text books that elites parents buy their children, and worse still, they do not understand the value of education since it follows that better career opportunities in life are for the elites and, thus, the perpetuation of a system that favours and maintains bourgeoisie ideology at the expense of the poor, and especially those of rural backgrounds. Hence, Zimbabwean education is here evidential of a capitalist weapon that has negative implications on social change since it is meant to preserve the status quo; the impoverished lot will remain so and those who have control over the economy will remain occupants of the apex of the academic hierarchy (Gwirayi 2010).

Depicted in clear terms here is the notion that the “haves” have the power to influence and manipulate the education system alongside their preferred objectives. Some critics have argued that the introduction of computers in schools is one way of gaining dominion of the less privileged groups by the elites. In Zimbabwe, many schools are rurally located are not electrified, thus, the introduction of computers and their prioritization is a sarcasm since schools will keep computers under lock and key for years to the disadvantage of rural students. This will mean that students from the elites, if not urban in centers where there is electricity, will perform better compared to their rural counterparts. This also means an academic overhaul of the curriculum, entirely for the benefit of the elite students since the strange computers generally function as every day toys for playing games by elite students. In Zimbabwe, the Education Commission of 1999, according to Hungwe (2002) plainly and painfully depicts the matter as:

Zimbabwe will soon enter the third millennium, which is dominated by economic competitiveness and information and communication technologies. These forces challenge the nation to revamp its curriculum [and to] provide . . . relevant technological equipment to enable students to develop the skills that are essential for a technological age.

This unravels the notion that the changes in the education system is to a greater extent a result of response to elite ideological, economic, and political forces perpetrating the vulnerable social system (Gwirayi 2010). Seen this way, the upper ranking economic elites have the power to influence and direct the course of education in society. They give their ideas the form of universality and represent them as the only rational universally valid ideas (Apple 1992).

It is also important to note that Zimbabwean school structure is based in stratification ideology. At different schools, children are placed into grades and groups by their teachers and teachers can use ability grouping to make teaching easier.

This idea of streaming is evident that the education system in Zimbabwe is biased towards the creation of social stratification. This means that the varied divisions that students are introduced to at school are meant to get them acquainted with the norms and values of the societies they are groomed to belong – the unbalanced classes of social, academic and economic aspects of society.

Also students from the non-elite tend to suffer both cultural and language barriers (Hungwe 2010), because most of the subjects taught in Zimbabwean schools are taught in the medium of English, thus, an indirect transmission of the dominant group's values, interests and missions. In Zimbabwe, irrespective of the targeted group's racial affiliation and orientation, the elite distinguishes themselves by speaking English and indoctrinating this borrowed mentality at an early age to their children that English means everything in life. This comes to the conclusion that the Zimbabwean curriculum has been designed to transmit the cultural values of the dominant groups and their linguistic proselytes.

In one sense, the Zimbabwean education system would be fair if children from high status families would be treated differently from those emanating from the underprivileged. This is because children who come from bourgeoisie families have the cultural capital which those from proletariat backgrounds do not have. Here, the concept “cultural reproduction” which is usually associated with the ideas of Bourdieu, is reinforced since education in Zimbabwe seem to comply with the view that the values and interests of capitalist regimes are reproduced and maintained in educational main streaming.

Interactionist Grounding

On the contrary, a classroom is a negotiated order (Gwirayi 2010). From an interactionist point of view, the notion that education transmits the elite values and intents is not all since the education system also is a dialogue between entities that encompass teachers and students, or amongst teachers themselves (Alant 1990). This means that the process of assimilating values and interests of the bourgeoisie can be reached after some negotiations, and not as an automated consequence. This line of argument therefore rejects the belief that Zimbabwean education is meant to advance elite ideology.

From another angle, interactionists seem to compromise and comply with the Marxist view that the education system maintains and perpetuates the ideas of the bourgeoisie. This is so because in interacting with pupils, teachers often label children in either negative or positive ways, and this is largely in conformity to the teacher's perceptions regarding the child's background. In practice, children will be labelled following their parents' social standing and affiliation. This, in a way, posits discouraging remarks to children whose backgrounds are not exemplary to their respective societies. Following this understanding, elite children are likely to succeed over and above those from pitiable social backgrounds, and this perpetuates the advances of elite ideology in the Zimbabwean educational system.

Functionalist Grounding

According to Parsons in Haralambos and Holborn (1990), the education system is the proving ground for ability, and hence, the selecting agency for placing people in different statuses in line with their educational endeavors. Seen this way, achievement is measured by a student's performance at school, especially in set examinations as well as their behaviour is measured alongside an instructive school decorum. All children are examined and instructed using the same rubrics irrespective of their racial, sex, social class, or ethnic background. This means that schools adopt 'meritocratic' principles as opposed to ascription. Thus, to Parsons, hard work and equality of opportunities are the key aspects determining the success or failure of children in primary schools. In Zimbabwean primary schools, children of the same stream are more often than not taught by the same teacher using the same learning and teaching methods. When they write examinations, failing or passing will be determined by each child's performance and dedication to school work. Different statuses will also be attained through children's performance in equal and fair circumstances. In this regard, Zimbabwean education is acquired in a learning environment that has justice and equality for all social classes.

To elaborate further, functionalists believe in hard work, talent and ability. They understand that as long as a child works hard and is talented, he or she will pass irrespective of the social background and parental educational positioning. This rejects the defeatist Marxist mentality that those emanating from poor family background are bound to fail. The education system accords all students with equal opportunities, and therefore, success or failure is largely dependent upon each child's potential and hard work using available resources. In this sense, education is meant for all social classes, and not restricted to only the elite.

Feminist Grounding

Feminists also argue that education is meant to further the ideals of patriarchal dominance. This is largely because of the gendered dichotomy that some schools practice which tend to socialize male students in different ways from their female counterparts. Thus, it is argued that the very basis of gender socialization is when students' names are put on different boys/girls columns in their class registers. This can be further reinforced by the cultural bias that boy children can be better educated than girl children, and this has disadvantaged and deprived many girls, thereby making them have a blurred future via ambitions and goals. This negated cultural socialization of girls which was pathetically exposed by Zhuwarara (2001), quoting from Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* that: "Can you cook books and feed them to your husband? Stay at home with your mother. Learn to cook and clean. Grow vegetables". This is a clear indication that societies socialise boys towards greener pastures and higher social roles in life, relative to girls (Chifunyise 1998), and this points out how patriarchal canons suppress and oppress females at the same time, advancing the values of male dominance as social, academic, economic, and political superiors.

Also, exponents of the feminist ideology such as Millet (1990), Srieden (1973) and Dakley (1978) as evidenced in Alant (1990) points out that nurture and not nature is the profound cause for gender suppression and divide. They reject the idea the different ways in which male and females relate are results of their differences in biological givens. Thus, their line of argument is that boys and girls, if given the same conditions and treated equally can be at par in terms of academic achievement. This means that some girls can even perform better than boys since their differences in biology poses no negative effect in as far as performance is concerned.

Conclusion

Consequently, the neo-Marxist ideology is depicted as a cause and catalyst in the advancement of elite social order of maintaining the status quo for a number of causes like to secure labour from the underprivileged. From a functionalist vantage point, social change should be functional to society, based upon consensus among the members of society (Gwirayi 2010), otherwise it is dysfunctional. It is also quite observable that the Zimbabwean education system is designed to perpetuate the status quo between the rich and the poor because children from well-to-do families go to better and more expensive schools where they are usually groomed for elite life and on-the-top career opportunities. It was also observed that even if they attend the same schools, the stratification system will grade them as mediocre, and merit classes were the mediocre which received less or no attention from their respective teachers. As a concluding note, Blackledge and Hunt (1985) as cited by Gwirayi (2010) coincide with Althusser's view that education is an ideological state apparatus, used to disseminate the ideas of the elite.

Acknowledgements

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