

## *Full Length Research Paper*

# **State, schooling and society: Contemporary debates**

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**The paper articulates debates surrounding schools and schooling in the contemporary era with a view of showing some granted assumptions about schools and schooling by some educationists. The paper further shows that schools are always arenas or sites of struggle where ideological hegemonic control is fought for by various actors, such as: the state, church, teachers, parents or students. This, therefore, warrants that schools should be looked at differently and be scrutinized in order to understand the dynamics within them, as power and control are contested on a daily basis by different stakeholders. It is hoped that educators will begin to open these 'black boxes' so as to improve their pedagogy.**

**Key words:** State, schools, schooling, society, ideology, hegemony, debates.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Education or schooling is one of the areas that have been taken for granted by many people because it has always been looked at as a social institution which prepares learners for different roles they are going to take in the society. It has always been equated with self-growth, development and national development. Instabilities in schools were for a long time regarded as minor agitations by unruly learners who did not want to toe the line. The debates that follow by different theorists of schooling shed different light on some of the granted assumptions about schooling.

### **The debate by theorists**

Structural-functionalists, after Parsons, believe that schools are neutral avenues where the youths are socialized into the norms and values of the society. Differentials in the outcome caused by schooling are usually accepted as reflecting the merit and ability taken as necessary and useful for the division of labour in modern capitalist societies. The Marxist reproduction perspective instead tries to explain differently the differentials in achievement and outcome of learners by attributing them to socio-economic inequalities in the society. These social hierarchical differences were said to be perpetuated by schools in the interests of capital.

Schools were not seen as neutral avenues, but as arenas where capital interests were reproduced, maintained and perpetuated.

Resistance analysts contend that, as much as schools perpetuate, maintain and reproduce the interests of capital and those of the dominant group in the society, this process of reproduction does not happen smoothly, but is met with resistance from various groups within and outside the schools. As a result, they argue that schools must be seen as arenas of struggle and contestation. This latter perspective will be espoused by this study, but since the resistance perspective does not deny the reproductive role of schools, the reproduction perspective will also be reviewed in order to contextualize the resistance perspective. One of the first main generation of reproductionist theorists, Althusser (1971), argues that education is one of the 'ideological state apparatuses' (ISAs) that plays an important role in the maintenance of the state. He further argues that, in the capitalist societies, schools have replaced the church in the reproduction of labour power, skills and the reproduction of the workers to the submission of the ruling ideology. However, this does not mean that other ISAs like the church, family, media and trade unions, do not contribute to the maintenance of the capitalist system. Thus, Althusser succinctly epitomises what he says about the role of schools in the reproduction of labour power, skills

and dispositional values of the workers:

"What do children learn at school? ...They learn to read, to write and to add...and a number of other things as well... which are directly useful in the jobs of production. Thus, they learn the "know-how". But besides these techniques and knowledge, and in learning them, children at school also learn the "rules" of good behaviour. That is, the attitude that should be observed by every agent in the division of labour, according to the job one is "destined" for: rules of morality, civic and professional conscience, which actually means rules of respect for the socio-technical division of labour and ultimately the rules of the order established by class domination. To put this more scientifically, I shall say that the reproduction of labour power require not only a reproduction of its skills, but also at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order, that is, a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression, so that they too will provide for the domination of the ruling class.... (Althusser, 1971)".

However, Althusser's account of education in capitalist societies is too deterministic and does not allow room for any change or any possibility for change except workers' revolution that will replace a capitalist mode of production with a socialist one. Moreover, Althusser's account does not show any areas of struggle or contestation in the reproduction process within the capitalist schools. The agents in these schools are merely passive and working submissively to the dictates of the ruling ideology. Aronowitz and Giroux (1985) in criticising the first generation of reproduction theorists like Althusser contend that they ...have failed to provide any major insights into how, teachers, students and other human agents come together within specific historical and social contexts in order to both make and reproduce the conditions of their existence (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1985).

Moreover, these reproduction theorists have downplayed the importance of human agency and the notion of resistance. As a result, there is little hope for "challenging and changing the repressive features of schooling". The contradictions and struggles that are existent within the schools have been ignored by the reproduction theorists. Blackledge and Hunt (1985) also contend that Althusser shows how social order is maintained in the capitalist societies through the reproduction of social relations in the schools and does not emphasise the importance of struggle and the factors which led to social change (Blackledge and Hunt, 1985).

Further, Blackledge and Hunt (1985) argue that Althusser's views on education are in many respects

functionalist, because he sees the socialization process in the capitalist societies as smooth and successful and the agents within the schools as unable to do anything about it, but "grin and bear it". Both theorists (that is, Blackledge and Hunt) bring a new dimension of resistance into the debate on reproduction, which the reproduction theorists are silent about. They contend that reproduction is often met with some form of resistance. The 'correspondence principle' is what Bowles and Gintis bring into the debate on the reproductive nature of the schools. They argue that schools are replicas of the workplace and as such, inculcate workplace norms and values into the pupils. Bowles and Gintis (1976) argue that schools function to serve the interests of capitalism in two major ways. First, they reproduce the social relations inherent in a capitalist society, by differential selection and training of students with skills required in the workplace or marketplace. These inequalities created are rationalized through the meritocratic tendencies of the schools and the purported equal opportunities for all students. Secondly, they reproduce consciousness, dispositions and values required for the maintenance of capitalist social relations. In their own words, Bowles and Gintis (1976) say:

"First, schooling produces many of the technical and cognitive skills required for adequate job performance. Secondly, the educational system helps legitimate economic inequality. Thirdly, the school produces, rewards and labels personal characteristics relevant to the staffing of positions in the hierarchy. Fourthly, the educational system, through the patterns of status distinctions fosters, reinforces the stratified consciousness on which fragmentation of subordinate economic classes is based (Bowles and Gintis, 1976)."

Though Bowles and Gintis raised important issues on how schools reproduce the social relations and false consciousness amongst the students in class in perpetuation of the interests of capital accumulation, their analysis succumbs to same criticisms levelled against Althusser. Their social reproduction theory is much too simplistic and overdeterministic, in that it ignores the key issues regarding the role of consciousness, ideology and resistance in the schooling process. Moreover, the theory does not tell us what educators and students can or are able to do to change their plight or circumstances in schools.

Giroux (1983) says that "Not only does their argument point to a spurious 'constant fit' between schools and workplace, it does also ignore important issues regarding the role of consciousness, ideology and resistance in the schooling process" (Giroux, 1983). In addition, there is no hope for social change in their account. Giroux (1983) says Bowles and Gintis "relegate human agency to a passive model of socialization and overemphasize

domination, while ignoring contradictions and forms of resistance that characterize social sites like schools and workplace" (Giroux, 1983). Adding to this, Cole (1988) says the explanatory power of Bowles and Gintis' theory is too deterministic and does not allow room for any kind of progressive change or action. Moreover, they do not say anything about the struggles that take place in production and in education. Bowles and Gintis have downplayed the contradictions and patterns of opposition in schools, which will be brought to the fore in this work. The "dominant ideologies and social processes [are] mediated rather than simply reproduced by the cultural field of the school" (Giroux, 1983). Bourdieu (1977) emphasizes the cultural reproduction of education which he bases on the notion of 'cultural capital'. Schools do not only reproduce the structure of the social relations, but also transmit the values and norms of the dominant group in the society. Bourdieu (1977) argues that the Bowles and Gintis' view of the correspondence principle is that, schools mirror the society, fall short by being deterministic and ignore the relative autonomy of schools. He argues that schools perpetuate the structure of class relations and makes this reproduction appear neutral. It is in the guise of independence and neutrality that schools serve external interests and thus effectively actualize these covert functions. The notion of cultural capital-linguistic and cultural competencies one inherits from his/her class is central to Bourdieu's work. He argues that schools are embedded in a particular culture that reflects the culture of the dominant group in society. He argues therefore that students born in families with the cultural capital valued by the dominant society are at an advantage over those whose families are not connected with the cultural capital valued by the dominant society. Bourdieu sums it up:

"The educational system reproduces more perfectly, the structure of the distribution of cultural capital among classes, in that the culture which it transmits is closer to the dominant culture..[It] offers information and training which can be received and acquired only by subjects endowed with the system of predispositions, that is, the condition for the success of the transmission and the inculcation of the dominant culture. By doing away with giving explicitly to everyone what it implicitly demands of everyone, the educational system demands of everyone alike that they have what it does not give. This consists mainly of linguistic and cultural competencies and that relationship of familiarity with culture which can only be produced by family upbringing when it transmits the dominant culture" (Bourdieu, 1977).

A similar notion of cultural capital and its role in perpetuating social inequalities is held by Bernstein (1977) who argues that schools perpetuate the social

inequalities because they teach the students through 'elaborated codes' into which children from the dominant culture have been socialized.

Nonetheless, Bourdieu, like other reproduction theorists, fails to bring the issues of struggle, diversity and human agency to the fore in his theory of cultural and social reproduction. His two classes are portrayed as homogeneous, without inner conflict and the agents within them as helpless victims who cannot do anything to escape the dominant cultural capital. As a result, there is no hope for individual and social change. Giroux (1983) contends that Bourdieu's "one-sided emphasis on ruling-class domination and its attendant cultural practices, .. [shows] that both [his] concepts of capital, as well as [his] notion of class are static categories" (Giroux, 1983).

Gramsci rejects the economic deterministic or reductionistic approach taken by the reproduction theorists, by which every social phenomenon is determined and explained through political economy. According to him, what is happening in the society is the struggle for hegemony, whereby antagonistic classes struggle to have their ideologies as dominant and their world view used to explain social phenomena. Since Gramsci breaks with the economic reductionist approach, his approach is plausible, in that schools are always sites of ideological struggle and conflict with the efforts of the state to control education on the one hand and teachers, parents and students as actors capable of effecting and resisting change in education on the other hand.

Gramsci brings in the role of the intellectuals in the development of hegemony and counter-hegemony. Counter-hegemony is tantamount to resistance which will later be developed by Giroux. Gramsci (1971) argues that, apart from the two major antagonistic classes in the capitalist system, that is, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, each class has its own organic intellectuals, whose main function is to "give homogeneity and awareness of its own function not only in the economic field, but also in the social and political fields" (Gramsci in Forgacs, 1988). These intellectuals are the ones who are associated with either the bourgeoisie or proletariat and try to win people over to them to achieve hegemony for the bourgeoisie or counter hegemony for the proletariat. Intellectuals are what Gramsci call 'functionaries' since they are working as deputies or managers of either group until consensus is reached. Gramsci categorizes intellectuals into traditional and organic intellectuals, as examples of these antagonistic classes. These 'functionaries' are working hard to win people into the classes they are working for, either through persuasion or coercion (though seldom), until consent results are achieved. In schooling, every group has its own traditional intellectuals or organic intellectuals. They can be state, church, teachers, parents or student functionaries who are incapable of initiating any change in education.

As a result, state apparatuses like schools are seen as places where hegemony is both struggled for and

contested. The struggle for hegemony and counter-hegemony in schools is normally seen among the teachers, the churches and the state and the way in which they draw on intellectuals to establish some control and hegemony over schooling.

Giroux extends Gramsci's notion of counter-hegemony further when he brings in the issue of contestation and struggle within and outside the schools. The resistance within the schools comes mainly from teachers and students, while outside the schools, comes from civil society, specifically from parents and educationists. Giroux (1981) argues that in the analyses of the reproduction theorists, schools are often "falsely compared to prisons, asylums and other oppressive 'total institutions'. Students often are seen as inmates and teachers seen as prison guards within the 'wooden metaphors' employed by supporters of this view" (Giroux, 1981). Yet, in reality, teachers are not passive prison guards and supportive of the dominant culture, in that they often resist the demands of the dominant culture. He further argues,

"like workers on the production line, ... teachers, though in different ways, often reject the basic messages and practices of schools" (Giroux, 1981).

The same notion of resistance is taken further by Apple (1982) who acknowledges that schools are "reproductive organs, in that they do help select and certify a workforce" (Apple, 1982), but he also contends that, though the reproduction theorists are right to say that schools are reproductive organs, they have overlooked the fact that the reproduction process is not happening as smoothly as they would like us to think. He argues that there are contradictions at work in the process, which do not necessarily work for the interests of the dominant culture and capital accumulation.

In Giroux's view, there is no 'constant fit' between schools and the workplace which the reproduction theorists claim exist. Schools in this regard are sites of struggle and contestation where there is a constant and incessant contestation for ideological hegemonic control. In addition, Apple argues that teachers are not passive bearers of the ideology which schools are attempting to transmit. He says that, teachers to some extent can constitute an opposition and a countervailing group in the school system.

Apple also believes that the state is a 'site of conflict among classes and class segments and among gender and social groups as well' (Apple, 1982), but the state does not have to force people to think alike; instead it tries to generate consent amongst the fundamental groups (which in this case are teachers and churches) to build its legitimacy and hegemony. Schools, he argues, do work in a manner similar to that of the state where consent is not sought out by force.

Apple emphasizes that schools are relatively autonomous and as such are terrains of contestation,

whereby different ideologies struggle to gain hegemony. He argues,

"hegemony is not an already accomplished social fact, but a process in which dominant groups and classes manage to win the active consensus over whom they rule" (Apple, 1982).

It is in the light of this struggle to win over the consent of the fundamental groups that we have to analyze what goes on in schools.

Carnoy and Levin focus on another important aspect of schools, that is, their contribution to extending democracy and peoples' rights in the society. Carnoy and Levin (1985) argue that, though schools work towards the reproduction of unequal, hierarchical relations of the capitalist work place, they also work towards the expansion of economic opportunities for subordinate groups as well as towards the extension of their democratic rights.

They argue that education and schooling do not work harmoniously in assisting in the process of capital accumulation and expansion, because they are also enhancing the expansion of the democratic rights of citizens. In this regard, schools can conflict with the narrow demands of capital. According to Carnoy and Levin (1985):

"[t]he educational system is the principal public institution organised for shaping youths into working adults, but schools are a subject of conflicting forces over their purpose and operation. Public education both reproduces the unequal hierarchical relations of the nuclear family and capitalist work place, and also presents opportunities for social mobility and extension of democratic rights" (Carnoy and Levin, 1985).

Although arguing about the reproductive potential of schools, Carnoy and Levin also emphasize the important element of conflict arising out of the dual role of schools for preparing workers as well as citizens. However, Carnoy and Levin's accounts of schooling are still functionalist because they see the limits of the democratic rights in the capitalist societies dictated by those who are in control of the state. Nonetheless, the contradictions they have brought to light have saved their theory from being mechanistic, deterministic and occluding human agency.

Like Carnoy and Levin, Dale (1989) notes the role of education in expanding economic opportunities and democratic rights, but he understands its contradictions differently. He starts his analysis by examining the different needs of capital that the state has to take into account. According to him, the capitalist state faces three core problems:

(i) Support of the capital accumulation process;

- (ii) Guaranteeing a context for its continued expansion;
- (iii) The legitimation of the capitalist mode of production, including the state's own part in it (Dale, 1989).

He also argues that these three core problems are sometimes mutually contradictory and that the state has no ready-made permanent solutions to deal with all of them simultaneously. Thus, Dale argues that education must produce a differentiated labour force to answer the requirements of the process of capital accumulation. However, for the state to legitimate itself in the process, it will also have to use a social democratic liberal discourse to indicate that the state will ensure equal educational opportunity to expand the democratic rights of society. As such, there lies one of the main contradictory natures of education.

Aronowitz and Giroux (1985) highlight the resistance to schooling coming from students of the subordinate class. Following Willis (1977), they argue that the students see a contradiction between what schools purport to be doing and what happens in the day to day realities of school life (Willis, 1977). They argue that student resistance is not just a deviant behaviour from the dominant culture, but it is a way by which the students emancipate themselves from the dictates of the dominant culture. They also warn against different forms of resistance and distinguish between the resistance which strives for emancipation and the resistance that is tantamount to conformism and accommodation with the dominant culture. As such, they sum up the contestation at schools as follows: Schools represent contested terrains marked not only by structural and ideological contradictions, but also by collectively informed student resistance. In other words, schools are social sites characterized by overt and hidden curricula, tracking, dominant and subordinate cultures, and competing class ideologies (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1985).

This shows that students are also key players in schools and schooling and therefore, they should not be taken for granted as helpless and compliant victims of the education system. Like other actors, they have their own agendas about schools and schooling.

The last strain of theorists debating the issues of state, schooling and society are the postmodernist theorists (Jean Baudrillard, 1981, 1984; Jean Francois Lyotard, 1984). They contend that all these other theorists, that is, functionalist, reproductionists, conflict and resistance theorists are modernist theorists whose theories about state, schooling and society are steeped or enmeshed in the tradition of enlightenment and reason. According to Ballantine (2004: 20), these modernist theories are premised on three issues:

First, they believed in progress through science and technology, even if they were skeptical of the positivist social science.

Secondly, they emphasized the enlightenment belief in reason and thirdly, they stressed enlightenment principles

such as equality, liberty and justice.

They further argue that modernist theories are preoccupied with metanarratives which are grand, total or all-encompassing explanations of the world. They contest that the grand and total metanarratives have to be replaced by localized and particular theories. They see schools as sites for democratic transformation and that differences have to be celebrated rather than be condemned or marginalized. Local knowledge systems have to be incorporated in schooling so that not only Eurocentric knowledge should be regarded as knowledge. Students and teachers are seen as agents of change for democratic transformation of schooling and society. By so doing, students and teachers will be making schools an area of emancipation by rejecting master narratives. In a nutshell, Kivisto (2010: 133) summarizes what postmodernists contend thus: "postmodernists provide a pessimistic view of the current era" because grand narratives of modernity have not led people to the utopia promised by the advances in science and technology and rationality.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the lessons from these debates on schooling will help educators to understand the extent to which different groups bring in their own agendas and interests into the educational system and, as a result, how state control is challenged. Education and schooling are shown to be arenas of contestation, where at different times, churches, teachers, parents as well as students challenge and resist the state's hegemonic control. However, it should be noted that schools are not 'black boxes' where the conspiracy of the state takes place behind the backs of teachers, churches, parents and student leaders.

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