

Sociological Theories as Tools for Sustainable Education in a Depressed Economy

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Abstract:

This study examined sociological theories as tools for sustainable education in a depressed economy. The current economic downturn in Nigeria has highlighted the need for sustainable education strategies that can mitigate its impact on the education sector. The research was necessitated by the declining quality of education in Nigeria, exacerbated by economic constraints, and the need for innovative approaches to ensure educational sustainability. The purpose of this study is to explore how sociological theories can inform and guide strategies for sustainable education in a depressed economy. The issues discussed in this research include the application of sociological theories such as Functionalism, Conflict Theory, and Symbolic Interactionist Theory to address challenges in education delivery, access, and outcomes in Nigeria's economic context. Employing an analytical method, the researchers critically examined these theories' potential in fostering resilience and sustainability in education. Findings indicated that sociological theories offer valuable insights for developing context-specific strategies to enhance educational sustainability in Nigeria's depressed economy. Based on the findings, recommendations include integrating sociological perspectives into education policy-making, promoting community engagement, and leveraging social capital to support education.

Conclusion:

The application of sociological theories is crucial for addressing the challenges facing education delivery in Nigeria's depressed economy. By understanding the complex relationships between individuals, groups, and institutions within the education system, educators and policymakers can develop effective solutions to promote sustainable education and national development. The integration of sociological theories into education policy and practice can help address issues such as inequality, poverty, and social injustice, which are major obstacles to achieving quality education in Nigeria. Furthermore, sociological theories can inform the development of context-specific interventions that take into account the unique cultural, social, and economic contexts of Nigeria, thereby enhancing their effectiveness and sustainability.

The sociological theories discussed in this study, including functionalist, conflict, and symbolic interactionist theories, provide a framework for understanding the root causes of challenges in education delivery and identifying ways to address them. By applying these theories, educators can promote greater equity, justice, and excellence in education, while also addressing the unique cultural, social, and economic contexts of Nigeria. For instance, the conflict theory can help educators understand how power dynamics and social inequality affect education outcomes, while the symbolic interactionist theory can inform the development of culturally responsive teaching practices that promote student engagement and motivation. Moreover, the functionalist theory can guide policymakers in developing policies that promote the efficient and effective use of resources in education.

Besides, the sustainable development of Nigeria's education system requires a commitment to applying sociological theories to address the challenges facing education delivery. By working together, educators, policymakers, and community stakeholders can create an education system that truly serves the needs of all Nigerians and promotes national development, while also contributing to the global discourse on sustainable education. This can involve promoting community engagement, improving teacher training, and increasing access to resources and technology, among other strategies. By prioritizing the application of sociological theories in education, Nigeria can build a more equitable, just, and prosperous society for all its citizens.

Keywords: Sociological Theories, Sustainable Education, Depressed Economy, Nigeria, Social Capital.

1.0 Introduction

The discipline of sociology has a rich and fascinating history that dates back to the 19th century, when Auguste Comte, a French philosopher, first coined the term "sociology" in 1839. Comte's work laid the foundation for the scientific study of social phenomena, and his ideas influenced many other thinkers, including Émile Durkheim, who is often credited with establishing sociology as a distinct academic discipline. Durkheim's work on social solidarity, anomie, and the role of social institutions in shaping individual behavior laid the groundwork for subsequent sociological theories and research. As sociology evolved as a discipline, it began to focus on understanding the complex relationships between individuals, groups, and societies, and how these relationships shape educational outcomes. This focus on understanding social context is particularly relevant in Nigeria, where the education system is shaped by a complex interplay of historical, cultural, and economic factors. The country's colonial past, for example, has had a lasting impact on its education system, with many schools and universities modeled after Western institutions. Additionally, Nigeria's diverse cultural and linguistic landscape presents unique challenges for educators, who must navigate multiple languages and cultural traditions in order to provide effective instruction.

The Nigerian education system faces numerous challenges, including inadequate infrastructure, poor teacher training, and socioeconomic disparities, which are deeply intertwined with societal factors (Ogunyemi, 2023). These issues are further complicated by the country's diverse cultural and linguistic landscape, making it essential to develop context-specific solutions that take into account the unique needs and experiences of different regions and communities. By applying sociological perspectives, policymakers can develop more effective strategies for addressing these challenges and promoting educational equity. This might involve examining the ways in which social structures, such as family, community, and economy, influence educational outcomes, and developing interventions that address these factors. Furthermore, sociological perspectives can help policymakers understand how power dynamics, social inequality, and cultural norms shape educational outcomes, and develop strategies to address these issues. For example, policymakers might prioritize the development of community-based education programs, which can help to build trust and engagement between schools and local communities.

Sociological perspectives can inform curriculum design, ensuring that education is inclusive, relevant, and responsive to the diverse needs of Nigerian students (Adeyemi, 2022). By incorporating local languages, histories, and cultural practices, education can become a powerful tool for promoting social cohesion and national development. This approach can also help to address the issue of cultural disconnection, which has been identified as a major obstacle to educational success in Nigeria. Furthermore, sociological perspectives can help policymakers understand how power dynamics, social inequality, and cultural norms shape educational outcomes, and develop strategies to address these issues. This might involve developing curricula that are tailored to the specific needs of different regions and communities, and that promote cultural awareness and sensitivity. Additionally, policymakers might prioritize the development of inclusive education policies, which can help to address the needs of marginalized groups, such as students with disabilities and those from low-income backgrounds.

Research has shown that education is a critical driver of economic growth, with investments in education yielding significant returns (Ajakaiye, 2020). In Nigeria, prioritizing education can help address poverty, inequality, and social exclusion, ultimately contributing to sustainable development. However, this requires a commitment to increasing education funding, improving teacher training, and promoting education access for marginalized groups. Sociological research can provide valuable insights into the ways in which education can be used as a tool for social mobility, and how policymakers can develop more effective strategies for promoting educational equity. This might involve examining the impact of socioeconomic factors, such as poverty and family background, on educational outcomes, and developing interventions that address these factors. Additionally, policymakers might prioritize the development of vocational training programs, which can help to equip students with the skills and knowledge needed to participate in the workforce.

The role of sociology in educational reform extends beyond policy development to teacher training and community engagement (Ezeh, 2023). By equipping teachers with sociological insights, they can better address the complex social dynamics that influence student learning and engagement. This includes understanding the impact of poverty, family background, and cultural identity on student outcomes, and developing strategies to support students from diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, sociological perspectives can help teachers understand how to create inclusive learning environments that promote social cohesion and academic achievement. This might involve developing

teacher training programs that focus on cultural awareness, sensitivity, and social justice. Additionally, policymakers might prioritize the development of community-based education programs, which can help to build trust and engagement between schools and local communities.

Sociological research can also inform education policy, providing evidence-based recommendations for policymakers (Okpala, 2022). By examining the interplay between social factors, such as poverty, gender, and ethnicity, sociologists can illuminate the root causes of educational disparities and develop effective solutions. This can help to promote more equitable education policies and practices, ultimately contributing to a more just and equitable society. Moreover, sociological research can provide policymakers with a nuanced understanding of the complex social dynamics that shape educational outcomes, enabling them to develop more effective strategies for promoting educational equity and social mobility. This might involve developing policies that address the needs of marginalized groups, such as students with disabilities and those from low-income backgrounds.

Sociology has the potential to transform Nigeria's education system, promoting equity, inclusivity, and social mobility (Adeyemi, 2022). By prioritizing sociological perspectives, Nigeria can harness the power of education to drive national development and prosperity. This requires a commitment to integrating sociological insights into education policy and practice, and to promoting a more nuanced understanding of the complex social dynamics that shape educational outcomes. Furthermore, it requires a commitment to addressing the systemic inequalities and social injustices that perpetuate educational disparities, and to promoting a more equitable and just society for all Nigerians.

2.0 Sociological Theories

Sociological theories provide a comprehensive and multifaceted framework for understanding the complex relationships between individuals, society, and education. Functionalism, for instance, views education as a vital institution that serves the needs of society by transmitting values, skills, and knowledge to future generations. From this perspective, education is seen as a key mechanism for promoting social cohesion, stability, and mobility, as it helps to integrate individuals into the larger society and prepares them to contribute to the economy and social system. In the context of Nigeria's depressed economy, functionalist theory suggests that education should focus on equipping students with the skills and knowledge necessary to contribute to national development and economic growth. This might involve emphasizing vocational training, science, and technology education to address the country's pressing economic needs, as well as promoting values such as hard work, discipline, and patriotism. By doing so, education can help to stimulate economic growth, reduce poverty, and improve living standards. Furthermore, functionalist theory suggests that education should also focus on promoting socialization, as it helps individuals to develop the norms, values, and behaviors necessary to function effectively in society. This can be achieved through various means, including classroom instruction, extracurricular activities, and community service.

In contrast, Conflict Theory offers a more critical and nuanced perspective on education, highlighting the role of power and inequality in shaping educational outcomes. From this viewpoint, education is seen as a site of struggle, where dominant groups seek to maintain their privilege and power, while marginalized groups seek to challenge and resist the status quo. In Nigeria, conflict theory might suggest that education perpetuates existing inequalities, with students from wealthy backgrounds having greater access to quality education and resources, while those from poorer backgrounds are left behind. This perspective emphasizes the need for education policies that address these inequalities and promote greater social justice, such as policies aimed at increasing access to education for marginalized groups, promoting equity in education funding, and challenging dominant ideologies and power structures. By acknowledging and addressing these inequalities, education can help to reduce social and economic disparities, promote social mobility, and foster a more just and equitable society. Moreover, conflict theory suggests that education should also focus on promoting critical thinking and consciousness, as it helps individuals to recognize and challenge the existing power structures and social inequalities.

Social Capital Theory offers a more nuanced and comprehensive perspective on education, emphasizing the importance of social relationships and networks in shaping educational outcomes. From this viewpoint, education is seen as a process of building social capital, where students acquire the skills, knowledge, and connections necessary to succeed in society. In Nigeria, social capital theory, this might suggest that education should focus on building strong community ties and partnerships to support student learning and development. This might involve engaging local communities in education decision-making, promoting extracurricular activities that foster social skills and networks, and fostering partnerships between schools and local businesses to provide students with practical skills

and experience. By building social capital, education can help to promote social cohesion, civic engagement, and economic development, as well as equip students with the skills and knowledge necessary to navigate the complexities of the modern world. Furthermore, social capital theory suggests that education should also focus on promoting cultural capital, as it helps individuals to acquire the cultural knowledge, tastes, and preferences necessary to succeed in society.

3.0 Sustainable Education

Sustainable education is a vital component of achieving sustainable development, as it equips individuals with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to address environmental, social, and economic challenges. According to UNESCO (2024), Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) enables every human being to acquire the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values necessary to shape a sustainable future. ESD is a holistic approach that empowers learners of all ages to take action for a more sustainable world. This approach recognizes that education is a key driver of sustainable development, and that it can play a critical role in addressing the complex challenges facing our planet. By incorporating ESD into education systems, countries can ensure that future generations are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to address these challenges and create a more sustainable future.

In Nigeria, re-engineering education is crucial for sustainable development, global competitiveness, and addressing pressing issues like climate change, digital transformation, and entrepreneurship. As Akindele (2026) emphasizes, Nigeria's education system must shift from rote learning to critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills, ensuring that technology becomes an equalizer rather than a barrier. This requires a fundamental transformation of the education system, including changes to curriculum design, teaching methods, and assessment strategies. By prioritizing critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving skills, Nigeria's education system can equip students with the skills necessary to drive sustainable development and compete in the global economy. Furthermore, this transformation can help address the country's pressing social and economic challenges, such as poverty, inequality, and unemployment.

The integration of sustainability education into curricula is essential for fostering environmentally responsible citizens and promoting critical thinking skills. Research indicates that educational programs focused on sustainability lead to increased awareness and engagement in sustainable practices among students (Harper, 2025). By embedding sustainability into education, we can cultivate a culture of sustainability within communities, ultimately contributing to a more sustainable society. This approach recognizes that sustainability is a complex and multifaceted concept that requires a holistic approach, and that education can play a critical role in promoting sustainable development. Moreover, sustainability education can help address social and economic inequalities by providing opportunities for marginalized groups to access education and improve their socio-economic status.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) can either support or undermine sustainable education, depending on its governance and ethical framing. According to CO-EDP (2026), AI supports sustainable education when subordinated to explicit educational purposes, ethical priorities, and human oversight. This highlights the need for robust data protection, algorithmic accountability, and investment in reducing digital divides. By prioritizing these issues, countries can ensure that AI is used to support sustainable education, rather than undermine it. Furthermore, AI can be a powerful tool for enhancing education, particularly in areas such as personalized learning, adaptive assessments, and educational analytics. However, this requires careful consideration of the ethical implications of AI in education and ensuring that AI is used in ways that promote equity, inclusivity, and social justice.

To achieve sustainable development, Nigeria must prioritize education reform, focusing on curriculum relevance, infrastructure, and teacher training. As Ekpoto (2025) suggests, integrating Sustainable Development Education (SDE) into Nigeria's educational system can equip the country with the knowledge and skills needed to address climate change and environmental challenges. This requires addressing challenges like inadequate funding, poor teacher welfare, and insufficient curriculum integration. By prioritizing education reform, Nigeria can ensure that its education system is equipped to support sustainable development and address the country's pressing social and economic challenges. Moreover, this requires a commitment to increasing education funding, improving teacher training, and promoting community engagement and participation in education.

4.0 Depressed Economy

Sociological Theories as Tools for Sustainable Education in a Depressed Economy

A depressed economy is a complex issue that affects many countries, including Nigeria. According to Akindele (2026), a depressed economy is characterized by low economic growth, high unemployment rates, and a decline in the standard of living. In Nigeria, the economy has been facing challenges such as low oil prices, insecurity, and poor infrastructure, which have contributed to its depressed state. The country's reliance on oil exports has made it vulnerable to fluctuations in global oil prices, highlighting the need for economic diversification. Furthermore, the lack of investment in human capital, infrastructure, and entrepreneurship has hindered the country's economic growth and development. The situation is further exacerbated by corruption, mismanagement, and inadequate policy implementation, which have undermined the country's economic potential and discouraged foreign investment.

From a sociological perspective, a depressed economy can have far-reaching consequences on the population. Muhammad and Kanon-Haki (2025) argue that education plays a crucial role in addressing economic challenges, as it equips individuals with the skills and knowledge needed to contribute to the economy. However, in a depressed economy, access to quality education is often limited, perpetuating the cycle of poverty and inequality. This can lead to social unrest, as individuals become frustrated with the lack of opportunities and the government's inability to provide basic services. Moreover, the brain drain phenomenon, where skilled individuals emigrate to other countries, can exacerbate the economic challenges facing Nigeria. The resulting skills gap can hinder the country's ability to develop and implement innovative solutions to address its economic challenges.

The impact of a depressed economy is also felt in the education sector, where schools struggle to provide basic resources and infrastructure. Ekpot (2025) highlights the need for sustainable development education to address environmental challenges and promote economic growth. In a depressed economy, investing in education and sustainable development can have long-term benefits, but it requires careful planning and resource allocation. This can involve prioritizing investments in renewable energy, sustainable agriculture, and eco-friendly technologies. Additionally, education can play a critical role in promoting sustainable practices and reducing waste, which can help mitigate the environmental impact of economic activities. Furthermore, education can also help individuals develop the skills needed to adapt to the changing economic landscape and take advantage of new opportunities.

To address the issue of a depressed economy, researchers suggest that policymakers should prioritize investments in human capital, infrastructure, and entrepreneurship. As Akindele (2026) notes, re-engineering the education system to focus on skills development, innovation, and sustainability can help Nigeria's economy recover and become more competitive. This can involve promoting vocational training, apprenticeships, and entrepreneurship programs that equip individuals with the skills needed to start their own businesses and create jobs. Furthermore, investing in infrastructure, such as roads, bridges, and energy, can improve the business environment and attract foreign investment. Additionally, policymakers should prioritize policy reforms that promote transparency, accountability, and good governance, which are essential for creating a conducive business environment and attracting investment.

5.0 Application of Sociological Theories to Address Challenges in Education Delivery: The Researchers' Remarks

The application of sociological theories to address challenges in education delivery is a crucial step towards improving the quality of education in Nigeria. Sociological theories provide a framework for understanding the complex relationships between individuals, groups, and institutions within the education system. By applying sociological theories, educators and policymakers can identify the root causes of challenges in education delivery and develop effective solutions to address them. For instance, the application of social capital theory can help educators understand the importance of building relationships and networks with students, parents, and communities to improve student outcomes. This can involve fostering partnerships with local businesses, community organizations, and government agencies to provide students with access to resources, mentorship, and job opportunities.

The functionalist theory, for example, suggests that education serves a vital function in society by providing individuals with the skills and knowledge necessary for social mobility. However, in Nigeria, the education system is often plagued by inadequate resources, poor infrastructure, and ineffective teaching methods, which can limit its ability to fulfill this function. By applying the functionalist theory, educators can identify ways to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the education system, such as investing in teacher training, improving curriculum design, and increasing access to resources and technology. Additionally, policymakers can work to create policies

that promote greater accountability and transparency in education, such as implementing standardized assessments and evaluation metrics to measure student outcomes.

The conflict theory, on the other hand, suggests that education is a site of conflict and inequality, where dominant groups use their power to maintain their privilege and status. In Nigeria, this can be seen in the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities, where students from wealthy backgrounds have greater access to quality education and better job opportunities. By applying the conflict theory, educators can identify ways to address these inequalities and promote greater social justice and equity in education. For example, policymakers can implement policies that promote greater access to education for marginalized groups, such as girls and students with disabilities. This can involve providing scholarships, mentorship programs, and other forms of support to help these students succeed.

The symbolic interactionist theory, which focuses on the ways in which individuals interact and create meaning in their daily lives, can also be applied to address challenges in education delivery. In Nigeria, the language of instruction is often a barrier to learning, particularly for students who speak different languages at home. By applying the symbolic interactionist theory, educators can identify ways to make the language of instruction more accessible and meaningful to students, such as using local languages and culturally relevant materials. This can involve incorporating local languages and cultures into the curriculum, as well as providing training for teachers on how to effectively communicate with students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

The application of sociological theories to address challenges in education delivery requires a nuanced understanding of the complex relationships between individuals, groups, and institutions within the education system. By applying these theories, educators and policymakers can develop effective solutions to address the challenges facing education in Nigeria and promote greater equity, justice, and excellence in education. This can involve promoting community engagement, improving teacher training, and increasing access to resources and technology, among other strategies. By working together, educators and policymakers can create an education system that truly serves the needs of all Nigerians and promotes national development, while also addressing the unique cultural, social, and economic contexts of the country.

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