

Sociology Factsheet



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Role and Purpose of Education

This Factsheet will look at the following key points:

- What is the role of education in contemporary society
- How different sociologists would explain the role of education
- How different politicians would explain the role of education

The education system is a key institution in society. We spend a large part of our lives in education and clearly education has an important influence on us as individuals and on our future lives.

Activity

What do you think the purpose of education is?

Formal education provides students opportunities to learn through the official curriculum, which includes all the subjects studied in lessons e.g. maths, English.

Informal education provides students with the opportunity to learn outside the classroom. **The hidden curriculum** generally involves learning rules, routines and regulations. Students may learn these things without necessarily realising they are learning them.

Exam Hint: You may be asked to explain terminology such as "hidden curriculum" Make sure you know key terms and can explain them. Chief Examiner's comment that it is important to read these questions carefully. You may be asked to define/describe a term (e.g. hidden curriculum) or you may be asked to explain the function of Make sure you answer these questions appropriately.

Role of Education

Different sociological approaches have different views on the role of education in society:

- **Functionalist sociologists** examine institutions in terms of the positive role they play in society as a whole. For functionalists, education is seen as performing a beneficial role in society.
- **Marxist sociologists** examine society in terms of the struggle between powerful and less powerful groups. They argue that the powerful groups in society use the education system to impose their own beliefs and values on the rest of society. From this point of view, education seems to have a beneficial role only for certain groups
- **Interpretive approaches** focus on small scale interaction. They examine the meanings and the consequences of those meanings for education.



Education is seen to perform a wide variety of roles in contemporary society including:

- The Economic Role – Teaching skills for work
- The Selective Role – Choosing the most able people for the most important jobs
- The Socialisation Role – teaching norms and values
- Social Control – teaching acceptance of rules and values
- The Political Role – teaching people to be effective citizens

The economic role – Teaching skills for work Functionalists

Schools teach the skills and knowledge necessary for work in a modern, technical, industrial society e.g. literacy, numeracy, and computer technology. **Vocational courses** aim to train young people for the world of work. Schools prepare young people for their future roles within the workplace.

For **Marxists**, education is seen as reinforcing the class system. Children from less powerful groups (working classes) learn the skills necessary for the lower status jobs, while children from more powerful groups (middle and upper classes) gain the qualifications for the higher status jobs.

Evidence

In *Leaning to Labour: How working class Kids Get Working Class jobs*, **Paul Willis** studied a group of 12 working class boys (the lads) during their last year and a half at school and their first few months at work. He found the lads rejected school and created their own counter school culture. However, this very rejection of school prepared them for the low skilled low status jobs they were to take. The lads rejected educational success as defined by the school. Boredom at school was relieved by mucking around and breaking rules, also preparing them for boredom in work.



Interpretive Approach

Interpretative sociologists argue that pupils preparation for the world of work is affected by teacher expectations.

Evidence

Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) examined the effects of teachers' definitions of pupils. They told teachers in an elementary school in California that they had identified a number of pupils (labelled the spurters) as likely to make rapid progress. Unknown to the teachers, these children had been selected at random. A year later, the spurters made greater progress than their classmates and Rosenthal and Jacobson concluded that this was due to the way they had been labelled. Teachers expected more from them, conveyed their expectations to them and they acted in terms of it. These pupils were more prepared for the higher positions in the world of work than those who were not expected to achieve.

The selective role – Choosing the most able people for the most important jobs

Functionalists see the education system as a sieve, grading students according to their ability and placing individuals in occupational roles best suited to their talents and abilities. This process is based on the functionalist views that all individuals have equal opportunities in their school careers. Therefore, those who achieve high qualifications are seen as the most able and are therefore rewarded with higher pay levels and higher status in society. This is known as a **meritocratic** society.

Evidence

Talcott Parsons saw the school as a bridge between the family and wider society. Within the family the child's status is ascribed – fixed at birth. In wider society status is achieved. Adults achieve their status as bricklayers, doctors, clerks, teachers etc on the basis of ability and effort. Parsons further believes that schools help to select young people and allocate them to adult roles. Pupils are assessed and sorted in terms of their talents and abilities and this helps to allocate them to appropriate occupations.



Interpretive approaches argue that pupils are constantly being assessed and classified. On the basis of this they are defined as able or less able, placed in particular sets or streams, entered for particular examinations and given or denied access to certain parts of the school curriculum. Teachers are more likely to define middle rather than working class pupils as 'able', 'good students' and 'well behaved'. This may well disadvantage working class pupils. A label is a major identifying characteristic. If for example, a pupil is labelled 'bright', others will respond to this pupil and interpret their actions in terms of this label. There is a tendency for a self-fulfilling prophecy to result. The pupil will act in terms of the label and see themselves as bright (so fulfilling the prophecy others have made)

Evidence

Becker (1977) interviewed 60 Chicago teachers and found they tended to share a picture of the ideal pupil. This was used as a benchmark to judge the pupils they taught. The ideal pupil was highly motivated, intelligent and well behaved.

Pupils judged to be closest to this ideal were likely to come from middle class backgrounds, those furthest from it from lower working class backgrounds. As a result this group were labelled as discipline problems, as unmotivated as unlikely to succeed. These labels may have a significant effect on their education and on their future jobs.



Marxists do not believe the education system provides equal opportunities for everyone. They argue that it is designed to benefit the powerful groups. They claim that both teachers and schools reject working class children and that working class children therefore underperform. Marxists do not see the education system as meritocratic because it does not offer an equal opportunity to all groups in society.

The Socialisation Role – teaching norms and values

For **functionalists**, education also plays a role in teaching the values and norms of society to each new generation. School is seen as **an agent of socialisation**, through which children learn a common culture and belief. The education system brings children together from all backgrounds.

Marxists see education as socialising individuals into accepting the values of the powerful groups e.g. hard work is seen as preparing the future workforce for accepting hard work as normal when they enter the world of work.

Evidence

Findings from **Douglas** provides support for **Cultural Deprivation Theory**. This theory states that those at the bottom of the class system are deprived of certain values, attitudes and skills which are required for educational success. They begin school deprived of many of the qualities needed to do well. The effect of this disadvantage is cumulative – it grows as the child moves through the education system. They lack ambition and motivation and become fatalistic – they accept the situation rather than trying to improve it. This can lead to the self-fulfilling prophecy.

Interpretive Approach emphasises the importance of a socially constructed identity. This identity is shaped partly by people's perceptions of how others see them. There is a tendency for people to act in terms of the image of themselves which others project. This can lead to the self-fulfilling prophecy.

Evidence

Beynon (1985) examined how boys classified and evaluated each other during their first three months of secondary school. Their classification included 'good kids' (who stood up to the teachers), TPs (teachers' pets), bullies, dippoes or weirds and snobs and toffees. On the basis of these and other categories the boys formed friendship groups. Social classifications are important as they define what a person is and what others think about and expect from them



Social Control – teaching acceptance of rules and values

Functionalists argue that for society to run smoothly there must be some means of regulating people's behaviour and activities. Schools act as an **agent of social control**, by teaching rules such as punctuality and obedience

Marxists believe social control in schools is seen as reflecting social control in society, which benefits the powerful groups, e.g. the importance of obeying a teacher is preparation for obeying the boss in the workplace.

Evidence

Bowles and Gintis (1976) argue the correspondence between school and the workplace effectively reproduces labour power from one generation to the next. Schools, like wider society are based on hierarchies. Teachers give orders, pupils are expected to obey. Pupils have little control over their work or over the curriculum they follow. This corresponds to their later experience of lack of control in the workplace. Schools reward punctuality, obedience and hard work. This is directly in line with the requirements of employers in capitalist society.

Interpretive approaches can be explained in terms of teachers and pupils negotiating a 'working consensus' in the classroom. Each attempts to define and control classroom interaction. Teachers use a range of tactics including providing rewards and punishments to pupils. They use tales of what happened to previous students as warnings to their current pupils. Teachers are in a more powerful position than pupils – they have formal authority which is backed up by sanctions. However, pupils have ways of influencing the actions of teachers. Hargreaves (1975) argues that the order in the classroom is a negotiated order based on a consensus worked out between teacher and pupils.

The Political Role – teaching people to be effective citizens

According to **functionalists**, people learn about society through education. The political system is democratic and needs education to prepare pupils for citizenship. In this way they accept the political system and are able to exercise their voting rights wisely at election time.

Marxist would disagree with this. They believe that only certain political opinions and ideas are acceptable in education with radical ideas being rejected. This ensures that the political ideas of the powerful groups are accepted by individuals.

Exam Hint You should be able to explain these different functions of education in the exam. If asked to suggest the functions that education may perform, chose different functions e.g. socialisation, selection and training for work roles, not two different versions of the same function (e.g. 'socialisation' and 'teaching norms and values').

Exam Hint Exam questions may ask you to assess the importance of one function of education (e.g. assess the view that the function of the education system is to select and prepare individuals for their future work roles) In this type of question you will be expected to not only explain the importance of the function that you have been asked to (the economic role – teaching skills for work) but you will also need to show how important this function is in relation to the other functions of education. Chief examiners comment that when answering this question candidates need to show some detailed coverage of a range of functions from a variety of different perspectives e.g. Functionalist and Marxist views and these need to be linked to school and work.

Political Views on the Role of Education

	New Right	Liberals	Social Democrats
Philosophy	Elitism	Egalitarianism	Meritocracy
Focus	Needs of the economy	Needs of individuals	Needs of Society
School organisation	Separate schools	Mixed-ability teaching groups	Streaming banding and setting
Economic purpose of education	Basic literacy and numeracy required by employers Vocational training for a skilled workforce	Encourage creativity and develop talent so that each individual can make their contribution to society	Capital investment. More educated workers are more productive and society benefits from economic growth
Social Purpose of education	Establish respect for traditional authority Raise standards	Expression of differences Promoting tolerance and respect of others	Offer the same opportunity to all pupils and thereby diminish class stratification
Political purpose of education	Retain traditional values	Ability to be able to think critically Engage in political activity	Citizenship and as a means to change society

Test yourself!

1. What are the main roles of the Education System?
2. How would Functionalist explain the purpose of education?
3. Chose one role of education and describe how functionalists would explain this role of education
4. How would Marxists explain the purpose of education?
5. Chose one role of education and describe how Marxists would explain this role of education
6. How would interpretive approach explain the purpose of education
7. Chose one role of education and describe how the interpretive approach would explain this role of education
8. Explain how one political perspective would explain the role of education

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