

## Introduction

In conducting an analysis of education, Functionalists tend to be guided by two key questions:

1. What how education contribute to the smooth operation of society? (**Functions**)
2. How does education link to other institutions in society? (**Functional Relationships**)

These questions can be linked directly to the organic analogy of society. In the human body, each organ fulfils specific functions – for example, the lungs transfer oxygen from the air to the blood. In considering the functions, therefore, sociologists might highlight the role of education in transmitting social values from one generation to the next.

The second question is slightly more complicated – but, once again, can be related to the organic analogy: In the body, organs don't work in isolation – they are linked to each other. For example, the lungs oxygenating the blood would be pointless without the heart to then circulate the blood around the body. An analysis of the functional relationships, therefore, is concerned with looking at how education links to other institutions and systems in society - most notably the family and the economy.

As with functionalist analysis in general, the functionalist view of education tends to focus on the positive contributions made by education to the maintenance of the social system.

## Socialisation Function

A common theme in Functionalism is the need for a society to transmit its culture from one generation to another.

 **What do you think is involved in the "transmission of culture"?**

This transmission is twofold. Firstly, in order for progress to occur, knowledge must be transferred to new generations so that they can build on it. More importantly, however, the way of life of a society must also be transferred. In order for society to continue to exist, the shared system of norms and values - called **value consensus** – which allows collective action to take place must also be passed to the next generation.

The process of transmitting culture is called **socialisation**, and it is seen by a number of key functionalists as perhaps the most important function of education. Though socialisation is initially achieved through the family (an agent of **primary socialisation**), as the child grows up, education increasingly performs this function (an agent of **secondary socialisation**)

## Emile Durkheim

Durkheim is credited as the founding father of functionalism. He emphasised the role of education in promoting two main aspects of socialisation; ensuring a system of shared norms and values, and promoting social integration.

## SHARED NORMS AND VALUES

Durkheim argued that,

*Society can survive only if there exists among its members a sufficient degree of homogeneity; education perpetuates and reinforces this homogeneity by fixing in the child from the beginning the essential similarities which collective life demands.*

 **What is Durkheim's arguing?**

In this quote, Durkheim is arguing that the most important thing needed for society to continue is a shared system of norms and values. What makes society possible is collective action, and this is only possible if we all understand the rules for behaviour.

Durkheim's greatest fear is that society could descend into a state of normlessness or **anomie** - in which nobody would understand the rules for appropriate behaviour. This would have dire consequences for both the individual (without norms to direct their actions, they would feel isolated which could lead to suicide) and for society (without shared patterns of behaviour, collective activity is impossible).

Education, in Durkheim's opinion, is an important agency in ensuring that these shared norms and values are transmitted from one generation to another. The education system also ensures that knowledge is passed on - allowing progress to take place and understanding to develop.

This occurs through the official curriculum - in which the types of understanding we value is transmitted - and through the hidden curriculum. In schools, we internalise shared values and learn how to be "good citizens" which enables society to achieve cohesion and stability.

 **Give some examples of the kinds of values transmitted through education.**

## SOCIAL INTEGRATION

A vital task for all societies is to weld together a mass of individuals into a united whole - in other words the creation of **social solidarity**. In order for this to occur, Durkheim argued that people must be able to see that they "fit in" to the social system, and develop a commitment to society as a thing more important than the individual - they must become "social beings".

Durkheim argues that education plays an important role in this. He focuses particularly on History, arguing that the subject demonstrates to individuals that their shared heritage - demonstrating the links between the individual and society and showing young people that they are part of something larger than their immediate social group.

## HARGREAVES

Hargreaves has criticised the modern comprehensive school using Durkheim's perspective. He argues that these schools place too much emphasis on individual achievement, and not enough on the responsibilities the individual has towards group life in the school.

Furthermore, he argues that schools fail to provide dignity for working-class pupils. If pupils fail to achieve individual success in competitive exams, they will not develop a sense of belonging to the school. This will cause them to form subcultures, which reject the values of society.



**Suggest some ways in which schools could be reorganised to provide a greater sense of integration?**

Hargreaves argues that to address this problem, the curriculum should be reorganised to allow more experience of integration...

1. The formal curriculum should be expanded so that students should be able to pursue fields of study in which they have a special interest or talent. This would allow more students to experience success.
2. Compulsory elements such as community studies should be introduced to help students to develop a clearer view of their role in society.
3. Extra curricula activities such as sports and school plays should be emphasised. This would allow them to experience satisfaction from contributing to collective activities. They would consequently develop a sense of loyalty to the school, and learn to respect one another for the contribution each could make to the school.

We will examine Hargreaves in greater depth when we look at classroom interaction.

### Talcott Parsons

Parsons agrees with Durkheim on the function of education in transmitting shared norms and values - or, in his terms, promoting **value consensus**. He argues that this fulfils a key **functional prerequisite** (feature that society needs in order to survive) of **pattern maintenance** - ensuring that the behaviour of individuals is regulated by shared norms.

In particular, Parsons argues that education instils two major values in children that are central to western society; the **value of achievement**, and the **value of equality of opportunity**. Parsons consequently sees education as essentially meritocratic. Students are all placed in the same situation and encouraged to compete on equal terms in examinations.

### A Bridge Between The Family and Wider Society

Another key theme in functionalist perspectives on education is that schools are like a miniature version of wider society. The interaction within classrooms acts as a "practice run" for students' later lives, preparing them for adult roles. Both Durkheim and Parsons consequently see education as functioning as a "bridge" between the family and the larger society.

In many ways, this theme falls under the category of "socialisation functions" - however, it is significantly distinct to merit its own discussion.

### Emile Durkheim

The initial point in Durkheim's argument about education acting as a bridge between the family and wider society is a distinction between two types of relationship.

According to Durkheim, relationships within the family are based on love. Furthermore, people are born into family - it is based on a kinship relationship. Similarly, friendship groups are based on affection and membership of a peer group is based on choice.

Durkheim calls these types of relationship **affective** (i.e. based on affection) and contrasts them with the type of relationship found in wider society. Society is organised in terms of division of labour - people have different specialised skills and this means that people have to cooperate with others who are neither kin nor friends - what Durkheim calls **instrumental relationships**.

Education provides a context in which individuals learn to adopt these roles - providing a context where necessary skills can be learned. In schools, the child must interact with other members of the school community in terms of a fixed set of rules. This experience prepares him or her for interacting with members of society as a whole in terms of society's rules.

### Talcott Parsons

Parsons extended Durkheim's principle that the school acts as a "society in miniature", further explaining how education acts as a bridge between the family and wider society.

Within the family, the child is judged in terms of **particularistic standards**. Parents judge their particular child rather than judging him or her in terms of standards and yardsticks that can be applied to every individual. In society, however, everybody is treated and judged according to general standards that are applied regardless of kinship ties. Durkheim calls these **universalistic standards**.

Furthermore, within the family, status is **ascribed**. People are born into the role of, for instance, son or daughter. In wider society, however, status in adult life is largely achieved. People achieve their status as bricklayers, doctors, clerks, hairdressers or teachers on the basis of ability and effort.

It is a big jump between the particularistic standards and ascribed status of the family and the universalistic standards and achieved status of wider adult society. For Parsons, education helps to bridge this gap. Within the school, young people are not judged in terms of their ascribed status. They are judged in terms of standards that are applied equally to all pupils - standards of conduct and academic success. In this way, schools prepare young people to achieve their status in the adult world.

At the same time, schools promote the value of achievement. Young people rewarded for academic achievement with good examination results. In this way, the educational system reflects the wider society and socialises young people for their adult roles.

## Economic Function

Throughout functionalist analyses of education, another common theme is the links between the school system and the economy.

**Durkheim** initially developed this theme, arguing that education functioned to provide the economy with adequately skilled labourers – and using this idea to explain the emergence of a formal education system. **Avis** has extended this analysis to explain more recent educational reform.

**Parsons** and then **Davies and Moore** have extended the theme to explain how education also serves to provide role allocation - filtering people into the most suitable jobs and ensuring that the balance of workers corresponds to the needs of the economy.

## Emile Durkheim

Durkheim argues that a major function of education was to equip people with the skills and knowledge necessary for their future jobs. This functions to benefit society, as it means that the economy is provided with workers that fit its needs.

This argument was crucial in Durkheim's explanation of the development of education. He argued that in **preindustrial society**, jobs were largely unspecialised and the economy consequently needed workers with fairly basic skills - this meant that the family could provide informal education.

However, during the **industrial revolution** technological advances meant that the economy needed workers with a higher level of education and the family was simply not equipped to transfer this level of skill. Consequently, formal education evolved in direct response to an economic need.

Functionalists believe that society is a **self-regulating system** – as it develops, its needs change and it will automatically adapt to meet these needs. Durkheim's explanation provides an example of how education is an important institution in this adaptability.

## James Avis

James Avis has extended Durkheim's account of the development of education to explain more recent reforms - particularly those associated with New Vocationalism - in the context of economic necessity

Avis argues that prior to the 1950s labour was organised around simple, manual and repetitive tasks (called Fordism) - such as factory-line work. Employers, and consequently the economy, needed people who could follow instructions and carry out simple, repetitive tasks. Education reflected this, with a simple framework of qualifications concerning basic literacy and numeracy.

With more recent developments in technology (such as computers) the economy required more highly skilled and knowledgeable workers who are flexible, responsible and committed to the aims of organisations (Post-Fordism). The education system has responded to these needs and

new, more complicated qualifications evolved (such as the NVQ and GNVQ). These qualifications give employers more insight than "basic skills" - for instance, they reflect an element of group work and creativity.

## Talcott Parsons

Parsons extends Durkheim's argument, stating that education "*functions to allocate...human resources within the role-structure of adult society*". His point is that people have different abilities and skills (**human capital**) and that in order to function effectively, society needs to organise this capital. Education performs this function, as it is an important mechanism through which individuals are selected for their future role in society.

Within schools, students are tested and evaluated and skills are matched to the jobs to which they are best suited. Consequently, the school is seen as the main mechanism for **role allocation**.

Parsons also adds to Durkheim's account of the development of education. He argues that in order for society to operate, key **functional prerequisites** must be met - one of which is adaptability. The change in the education system in response to economic need is a clear demonstration of this adaptability.

## Davis and Moore

Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore have extended the view of the economic functions of education, making specific links between schools and the **social stratification system**.

For Davis and Moore, stratification is the mechanism by which society ensures that the most talented and able individuals are allocated to the most **functionally important** positions. Functional importance is linked to the amount of specialised training and qualifications required for particular occupations. For instance, a doctor is seen to be a more functionally important role than a milkman.

Because of the amount of training required, Davis and Moore argue that these jobs necessarily have high rewards (such as status and pay). In this way, inequality is a functional necessity - without it, everybody would receive the same pay and status and no one would be willing to take on the more difficult and responsible jobs.

However, ability is not equally distributed across the population - and some people are more talented than others. Davis and Moore say that education

*...is the proving ground for ability and hence the selective agency for placing people in different statuses according to their capacities.*

They consequently see education as performing a key function in selecting and filtering people into suitable roles - and ensuring that the right proportions of people are assigned to particular types of job. Avoiding, for instance, the creation of a society filled with managers with no labourers to manage.

Within education, the system of qualifications and certifications is vital in this function - providing a graded evaluation of the ability of students that then affects the type of job they can get. This means that more able students will gain higher grades, which will in turn allow them access to functionally important jobs.

Fundamental to this argument is the belief that education is meritocratic; that success is linked to ability and effort and not social background. In order for the system to operate effectively, selection should be based solely on ability, and factors such as wealth cannot be of influence.



**Write a paragraph expressing the above argument which includes the following terms:**

1. Role Allocation
2. Meritocracy
3. Setting and Streaming

**Now write a paragraph counter-argument which includes:**

4. Self-fulfilling prophecy
5. Labelling
6. Reproduction of inequality.



**List the following occupations on a side of A4: University Professor, Doctor, Lawyer, Teacher, Nurse, Typist, Supermarket Cashier, Pop Singer, Refuse Collector**

7. Identify the level what qualifications each of these occupations would require.
8. Do the jobs requiring more qualifications pay more than those requiring fewer qualifications?
9. Rewrite the list in order of how important you think they are to society?
10. Does pay and number of qualifications link with your new list?
11. Try to turn this evidence into a paragraph expressing a criticism of functionalism.

### Evaluating Functionalism

Functionalist perspectives on education offer an insight into how institutions function together to ensure the continuity of society. They also highlight the role of education in socialisation and the transmission of culture. Interesting insight is also given into how education relates to other institutions such as the family, economy and stratification system. However, functionalism is open to a number of criticisms.

Firstly, a number of theorists object to the way in which functionalism views students mechanically – as passive recipients of social values, rather than as interacting and autonomous individuals with freewill. Do you really think that students are “brainwashed” in schools?

Functionalism also makes the assumption that the values and norms transmitted in education are shared by everyone and work for the common good of society. Marxists would take issue with this position, arguing that there is not a single set of values to transmit. Society consists of various groups with different or even conflicting interests, and each group has its own set of values. Consequently, the values that education does transmit are likely to be those of the

ruling class - as it is these people who have the power to control education.

Furthermore, the "key values" of achievement and equality of opportunity assume that education operates as a meritocracy. However, there is considerable evidence that working class students and some ethnic minority students underachieve in schools – which suggests that success is, in part, determined by social background. Once again,

Marxists would argue that rather than preparing students to take part in a meritocratic society, the education system merely creates the **illusion** of meritocracy. This serves to legitimate social inequality (as it can be explained in terms of ability) and dissuades people from questioning their social role.

The view that education provides a transition to a wider society classified by achieved status can also be questioned. There is a predominance of white, middle-class men in socially powerful positions. This, together with evidence of the underachievement of some social groups in schools, suggests that ascribed status is a powerful force in both the education system and in wider society.

Functionalist views on the relationship between education and the economy can be challenged on similar lines. Role allocation for functionalists is on meritocratic lines – ensuring that the most able gain the most functionally important jobs. However, there is evidence that educational success is linked to social class, gender and ethnicity. Marxists in particular highlighting that schooling is less about filtering people into the most appropriate jobs and more to do with preserving and reproducing existing patterns of privilege and power.

Finally, the basic argument about a link between education and the economy can be challenged. Some critics have argued that the education does not particularly address vocational concerns – with a largely academic menu of subjects. Furthermore, students are largely tested by examinations – which only assess a small number of abilities (for example, memory).

The link between academic credentials and occupational reward can also be questioned. Judging functional importance in terms of pay, for instance, is problematic. A pop star earns more than a doctor, for instance, but pop-stardom requires few formal qualifications. Similarly, a university lecturer requires a high level of qualification (usually a Ph.D.), but does not usually receive high pay. Furthermore, some question whether "functionally important" jobs are necessarily those that require the most qualifications. For instance, some might argue that bin-men perform a more functionally important job than university professors.