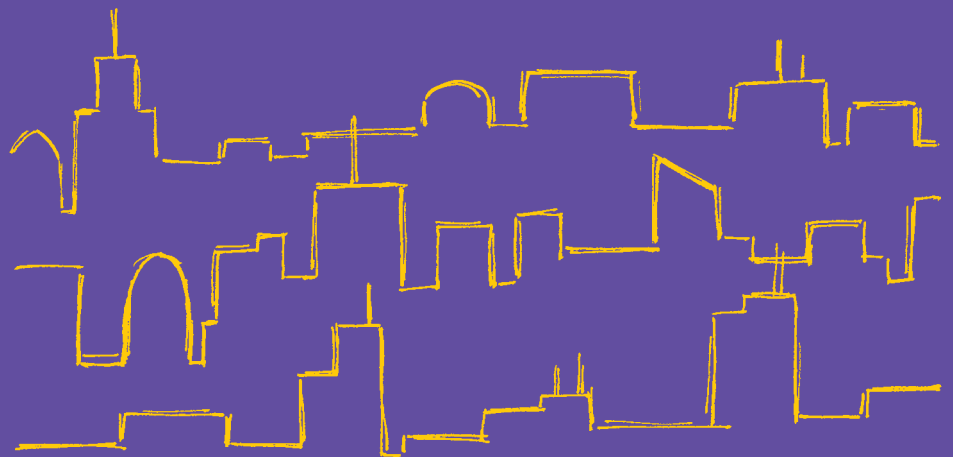


Cambridge International AS & A Level Sociology

STUDENT'S BOOK



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5 EDUCATION

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In many parts of the world today, education is a privilege rather than a right. In low-income countries, although access to formal schooling has increased, it is still limited. By contrast, in societies with compulsory mass education, many people are likely to have spent 11 or more years at school before progressing to further and higher education.

Some sociologists would see these experiences as worthwhile. Students learn to read, write and perhaps later to study academic subjects at A Level and beyond, and to prepare for life in the wider society. Others examine education within the context of social formations such as capitalism or patriarchy and, consequently, view it in a more negative light. They see education as benefiting some social groups – for instance, the rich and powerful – rather than all members of society. Such approaches see education as preparing students to accept life in an unequal society. They also argue that students are largely unaware of what education is doing to them and to the rest of society. This chapter looks at the positive and negative views of education and assesses the evidence for and against the different theories about the role of education in society.

Education is often seen as a key route to social mobility, enabling hard-working and talented individuals to achieve their potential and move up the class structure into high-status jobs. This chapter examines important debates about how far education operates on merit to provide equal opportunity to all regardless of their social background, class, gender or ethnicity.

Some sociologists explore what actually gets taught in educational settings. What factors influence the content of the curriculum? Does a hidden or covert curriculum operate alongside the official curriculum in schools and colleges? If so, how does it influence students?

A main focus of this chapter is inequalities in educational attainment linked to social class, ethnicity and gender. Why do those at the top of the class system tend to get the best exam results and go to the highest-ranking universities? Why do different ethnic groups have different levels of educational attainment? Why are girls now outperforming boys at every level of the education system in some societies? How far does intelligence influence educational attainment? To what extent do material and cultural factors linked to students' home backgrounds influence their attainment? Alternatively, are school-based factors such as student subcultures and teacher expectations more significant? Answers to these and other important questions are suggested throughout this chapter.

SECTION A

EDUCATION AND SOCIETY

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Section A focuses on the role of education in society. Three of the key concepts that you were introduced to in Chapter 1 are particularly important here. First, *power, control and resistance*. Potentially, education systems have enormous power to control people and shape their behaviour and ideas. Do education systems have an ideological role in keeping people in their place? Do they play a part in reproducing the power and privileges of dominant classes over time? Sociologists are interested in the control of the curriculum. Are powerful groups able to influence the content of the school curriculum? Resistance is an important concept within the sociology of education. How do some students exercise power in classrooms and resist their teachers' efforts to exercise authority over them?

Second, *inequality and opportunity*. The sociology of education explores structural inequalities in society such as differences in the distribution of resources including income and wealth. Are these class-based inequalities in the wider society reflected within education systems? Do they create barriers to educational attainment for some groups of students? Is equality of opportunity a reality within education systems? Do all students have equal opportunities to achieve their potential and to succeed, regardless of their backgrounds, gender or ethnicity? Does education provide a route of upward social mobility to students from less privileged backgrounds and to females? Or do social inequalities inhibit equality of educational opportunity and mobility?

Third, *structure and human agency*. Perspectives such as functionalism and Marxism adopt structural approaches that focus on the role of education in maintaining the social structure in its present form. How do schools contribute to maintaining the social structure? Do education systems shape individuals and constrain their behaviour through processes such as socialisation? Or do students exercise agency and choice within schools and classrooms by, for example, resisting their teachers' authority? Do schools produce conformists, rebels or both? The concepts of structure and agency are also important in the debates about the factors affecting educational attainment. Structural accounts focus more on material factors – for example, parental income – to explain differences in attainment between social groups such as working-class and middle-class students. Interactionist accounts focus more on classroom interaction, teacher–student relationships and individual agency when exploring topics such as differential educational attainment or student subcultures.

This section is divided into three parts. Part 1 looks at different theories about the role of education in society, including functionalist, Marxist and New Right approaches.

Part 2 explores the relationship between education and social mobility. It examines the idea of equal opportunity, different accounts of meritocracy (in which achievements are based on individual merit) and whether education systems are meritocratic.

Part 3 focuses on the curriculum. It examines some of the factors that influence the content of the curriculum, including power, economic factors and gender. It also looks at the hidden curriculum – the things that students learn in school (such as conformity and obedience) that are not part of the formal curriculum of history, geography and so on.

PART 1 THEORIES ABOUT THE ROLE OF EDUCATION

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Part 1 looks at different theories about the role of education in society. It begins by examining functionalist and Marxist accounts of the role and function of education. Does education perform vital functions and contribute to the well-being of society as a whole? Or does it mainly serve the interests

of the rich and powerful and maintain the capitalist economic system? Next, Bourdieu's ideas on the role of education in transmitting or reproducing the culture of dominant classes is explored. How does this cultural reproduction take place?

This part also looks at two perspectives on the relationship between education and the economy that have influenced the development of education in many societies – social democratic and New Right views. The New Right approach (or neoliberalism), with its emphasis on competition, the market and economic growth, is steadily becoming the driving force in global education. But should there be more to education than servicing the economy?

Unit 5.1.1 Functionalist views on education

Functionalists see society as a system made up of interrelated parts, such as the education system, the family and the economy. These parts work together to maintain society as a whole. A sociologist's job is to examine the function of each part – that is, how it contributes to the maintenance of the social system. Functionalists argue that certain things are essential for the maintenance of society. These include a shared culture, in particular shared norms (accepted ways of behaving) and values (beliefs about what is right and desirable). Functionalists focus on how the parts of society contribute to the production of shared norms and values.

Two related questions have guided functionalist research into education:

- › What are the functions of education for society as a whole?
- › What are the functional relationships between education and other parts of the social system?

As with functionalist analysis in general, the functionalist view of education tends to focus on the positive contributions that education makes to the maintenance of the social system. This unit examines and evaluates some of the main functionalist theories of education.

Émile Durkheim – education and social solidarity

The French sociologist Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) saw the major function of education as the transmission, the passing on, of society's norms and values. Durkheim (1961), furthermore, argued that a vital task for all societies is to join a mass of individuals together into a united whole – in other words, to create **social solidarity**. This involves a commitment to society, a sense of belonging, and a feeling that the social unit is more important than the individual.

Education, and in particular the teaching of history, provides the link between the individual and society. If the history of their society is brought alive to children, they will come to see that they are part of something larger than themselves; they will develop a sense of commitment to the social group.

Activity



Schoolchildren take the Pledge of Allegiance to the American flag. The USA is home to people from a range of cultural backgrounds. Education has helped to provide a common language, shared values and a national identity.

How might this picture illustrate Durkheim's view that schools develop social solidarity?

Education and social rules

Durkheim saw the school as society in miniature, a model of the social system. In school, the child must interact with other members of the school community in terms of a fixed set of rules. This experience prepares them for interacting with members of society as a whole in terms of society's rules.

Activity

In your view, to what extent do children learn to respect society's rules by first learning to respect school rules?

Education and the division of labour

Durkheim argued that education teaches the skills needed for future occupations. Industrial society has a **specialised division of labour** – people have specialised jobs which require specific skills and knowledge. For example, the skills and knowledge required by plumbers, electricians, teachers and doctors are very different. According to Durkheim, the specialised division of labour in industrial societies relies increasingly on the education system to provide the skills and knowledge required by the workforce.

Evaluation of Durkheim

Durkheim laid the foundation for functionalist theories of education. However, his work has been criticised:

1. Durkheim assumed that a society has a shared culture that can be passed on by the education system. Some commentators now see countries such as Australia, Canada, Mexico and Singapore as multicultural – as having a variety of cultures. As a result, there is no single culture for schools to pass on. However, it can be argued that in a multicultural society *some* shared norms and values are essential to hold society together – for example, a common language and a shared belief in tolerance and freedom of speech.
2. Marxists argue that the education system serves the interests of the ruling class rather than those of society as a whole (see Unit 5.1.2). Radical feminists see education as serving the interests of patriarchy or male dominance in society.
3. Some researchers argue that schools emphasise individual competition through the exam system, rather than encouraging cooperation and social solidarity (Hargreaves, 1982).

Talcott Parsons – education and universalistic values

The American sociologist Talcott Parsons (1951) outlined what has become the main functionalist view of education. Parsons argued that, after **primary socialisation** within the family, the school takes over as the main socialising agency. It acts as a bridge between the family and society as a whole, preparing children for their adult roles. This is known as **secondary socialisation**.

Within the family, the child is treated and judged largely in terms of **particularistic standards**. Parents treat the child as their particular child rather than judging them in terms of standards that can be applied to every individual. However, in the wider society the individual is treated and judged in terms of **universalistic standards**, which are applied to all members, regardless of their kinship ties.

Within the family, the child's status is **ascribed**; it is fixed at birth. For example, a child is a daughter and, in some cases, a sister. However, in advanced industrial society, status in adult life (such as occupational status)

is largely **achieved**. Thus, the child must move from the particularistic standards and ascribed status of the family to the universalistic standards and achieved status of adult society.

The school prepares young people for this transition. It establishes universalistic standards in terms of which all students achieve their status. Their conduct is assessed against the criteria of the school rules; their achievement is measured by performance in examinations. The same standards are applied to all students regardless of ascribed characteristics such as gender or ethnicity. Schools operate on **meritocratic** principles: status is achieved on the basis of merit – that is, ability and motivation.

Like Durkheim, Parsons argued that the school represents society in miniature. Modern industrial society is increasingly based on achievement, on universalistic standards, and on meritocratic principles that apply to all its members. By reflecting the operation of society as a whole, the school prepares young people for their adult roles.

Activity



Taking exams.

How does this picture illustrate:

1. Individual achievement?
2. Judgement by universalistic standards?

Education and value consensus

As part of the process of secondary socialisation, schools socialise young people into the basic values of society. Parsons, like many functionalists, maintained that **value consensus** – an agreement about the main values – is essential for society to operate effectively. According to Parsons, schools in American society introduce two major values:

1. the value of achievement – by encouraging students to strive for high levels of academic attainment, and by rewarding those who succeed

2. the value of **equality of opportunity** – by placing individuals in the same situation in the classroom and allowing them to compete on equal terms in examinations.

These values have important functions in society as a whole. Advanced industrial society requires a highly motivated, achievement-orientated workforce. This necessitates differential rewards for differential achievements, a principle that has been established in schools. Both the winners (the high achievers) and the losers (the low achievers) will see the system as just and fair, because their status or position is achieved in a situation where all have an equal chance. Again, the principles of the school mirror those of the wider society.

Education and selection

Finally, Parsons saw the education system as an important mechanism for the selection of individuals for their future role in society. Thus schools, by testing and evaluating students, match their talents, skills and capacities to the jobs for which they are best suited. The school is therefore seen as the major mechanism for **role allocation**.

Evaluation of Parsons

Like Durkheim, Parsons fails to adequately consider the possibility that the values transmitted by the education system may benefit a ruling minority rather than society as a whole. His view that schools operate on meritocratic principles is open to question – a point that will be examined in detail in later units.

Support for Parsons comes from the view that the increasing cultural diversity and difference in today's societies require the transmission of at least some shared norms and values. In this respect, schools have an important role to play (Green, 1997).

Kingsley Davis and Wilbert E. Moore – education and role allocation

Like Parsons, Davis and Moore (1967, first published 1945) saw education as a means of role allocation. However, they linked the education system more directly to the system of **social stratification** – in Western societies, the class system. Davis and Moore viewed social stratification as a mechanism for ensuring that the most talented and able members of

society are allocated to positions that are functionally most important for society. High rewards, which act as incentives, are attached to these positions. This means that, in theory, everybody will compete for them and the most talented will win through.

The education system is an important part of this process. It sifts, sorts and grades individuals in terms of their talents and abilities. It rewards the most talented with high qualifications, which in turn provide entry to society's functionally most important occupations.

Evaluation of Davis and Moore

Critics of Davis and Moore's theory argue that:

1. There is considerable doubt about the claim that the education system grades people in terms of ability. In particular, it has been argued that intelligence has little effect upon educational attainment. (See Part 4).
2. There is widespread evidence to suggest that social stratification largely prevents the education system from efficiently grading individuals in terms of ability.

These points will be considered throughout the rest of the chapter.

Activity



Many functionalists argue that the education system rewards highly talented people with the credentials to enter functionally important occupations. But do members of some groups face more barriers than others in accessing key jobs in society?

Explain one strength and one limitation of the functionalist view of education.

Key terms

Social solidarity This involves a commitment to society, a sense of belonging, and a feeling that the social unit is more important than the individual.

Specialised division of labour A labour force with a large number of specialised occupations.

Primary socialisation The earliest and probably the most important part of the socialisation process, usually within families.

Secondary socialisation The socialisation that takes place during later life, for example, within schools and workplaces.

Particularistic standards Standards that apply to particular people, for example, to particular children in families.

Universalistic standards Standards that apply to everybody – for example, to all college students or to all employees in the workplace.

Ascribed status Status or positions in society that are fixed at birth and unchanging over time, including hereditary titles linked to family background (for example, King or Princess) or the status of a daughter or son within a family.

Achieved status Status or positions in society that are earned on the basis of individual talents or merit.

Meritocratic Description of a system in which a person's position is based on merit – for example, talent and hard work – rather than on their social origins, ethnicity or gender.

Value consensus Agreement about the main values of society.

Equality of opportunity A system in which every person has an equal chance of success.

Role allocation A system of allocating people to roles which best suit their aptitudes and capabilities.

Social stratification The way that society is structured or divided into hierarchical layers or strata, with the most privileged at the top and the least privileged at the bottom. Examples include caste and social class.