

# Education as the most within society sociology essay



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Education is a right enjoyed by most within society, with a mandatory system in place in England for children to receive free education. However, with more emphasis placed on what education leads to in terms of employment in recent time, this essay will discuss whether education is a system in place, in which the sole purpose is to prepare students to serve the powerful. The powerful, in this context, being companies in a capitalist society. This essay will discuss the formation of the modern education system, the functionalist view of education and the opposing conflict theorist's view. It will also discuss what Althusser, Willis and Bordieu have found in studies as well as the social action theory and changes which occurred since the 1980s.

Examining education from a functionalist view-point, sees it as an institution providing an important function within society, with education playing a pivotal role in maintaining a stable society. According to Haralambos & Holborn (2008) teaching students the belief of being part of a wider social system, in turn creates a society in which the individual places more importance on 'social solidarity' rather than self worth and plays an important role in the socialisation of children. By imparting such values as discipline and responsibility, the structure within society can be maintained. Durkheim argued (in Burgess & Parker 2000) this was of particular importance in a more individually based society that was apparent at the time. Durkheim believed if these 'norms' and 'values' were not introduced via education, it could lead to anomie, a breakdown of values, normality and social solidarity. In Giddens (2009) Durkheim argued education played a key role in keeping social order amongst society and imparts the skills which are

needed in future working life. Macionis and Plummer (2008) show this is of importance in an industrialised society, where more than one skill may be needed to create a single product. Durkheim believed in the importance of educating children the belief of rules and order stating education “ is the first initiation into the austerity of duty. Serious life has now begun” (Durkheim cited in Haralambos & Holborn, p600 2008). This indicates the importance Durkheim attributed to the education system as preparing children for entry into the work environment within society as an adult.

Although differing from Durkheim’s view on education in some aspects, Talcott Parsons also approaches the issue of education from a functionalist perspective. According to Fulcher & Scott (2003) Parsons placed more emphasis on achievement in the belief this gives more equality in terms of future opportunities. This is achieved by meritocracy, achievement based on merit. This is measured by examinations, which are structured to include every pupil collectively and are not tailored individually. This in essence means, in functionalist opinion, every pupil is given the opportunity to succeed from education via meritocracy According to Parsons (in Fulcher & Scott, 2003) in industrial societies, workers need to be prior educated of the importance of achievement. This is a link between education and employment.

By viewing education in a certain way, as Giddens states a “ society in miniature” (2008, p835) both Durkheim and Parsons look at the functions education performs for society as a whole. However, criticism of the functionalist perspective of education has been aimed at both Durkheim’s and Parsons’ approach. In Haralambos & Holborn (2008) it is argued <https://assignbuster.com/education-as-the-most-within-society-sociology-essay/>

Durkheim fails to take into account the multicultural nature of countries in modern society. There is also debate whether schools actually operate in the way Durkheim describes. A study by Hargreaves (cited in Haralambos & Holborn 2008) states individual achievement is of greater importance than the view of a shared solidarity within society. With further criticism aimed at Parsons' view which, it is argued, fails to consider the possibility of the ruling minority having control of the values they believe to be ideal.

The functionalist approach to education fails to take into account the multicultural aspects of society, believing a common national culture is the ideal. Conflict theorists, working from a Marxist perspective, believe the true nature of the education system arises from a link to industry and capitalism. Indeed Marx and Engels (in Marsh et al 2009, p611) state " by the action of modern industry, all family ties among the proletarians are torn asunder and their children transformed into simple articles of commerce and instruments of labour", believing education was driven by capitalism to provide workers for their companies. Within functionalist opinion, by using meritocracy as a subterfuge to claim every pupil has a fair chance, the issue of the ruling classes being in control of how education is delivered is not considered, as every child should have a fair chance of succeeding. Conflict theorists approach to the education system directly opposes the functionalist view, focusing on the inequality they argue exists within education. Within conflict theory, it is the social class and cultural background of a person that is of importance for greater opportunity once they leave education, rather than a perceived meritocracy.

Social class is an important factor within conflict theory on education. It is argued, there are unequal opportunities for lower class students, than for upper class students. According to Althusser (in Burgess & Parker, 2000) the education system is the main focus of capitalist society to primarily indoctrinate students, based on their class and background, in order to dominate and control the masses into being producers within a capitalist society. Althusser (in Burgess and Parker, 2000) argues religion has been usurped by the education system as the primary source of control within society. By monopolising the time pupils spend in an educational environment, they can be controlled into believing their options are limited to only serving the more powerful within society. Using constraints in this fashion means students have little control over their options once leaving education, other than to serve the powerful.

According to Bordieu (in Bilton et al, 2002) the achievements of upper class students compared to the relative failure of lower class students, were due to a reproduction of the class structure within the education system. Bordieu (in Bilton et al, 2002) believed success academically was borne not from merely achievement through examinations. Success was intrinsically linked to habitus, a general proclivity which society uses to classify certain aspects of things and determines the way people within society see themselves and also what he termed as 'cultural capital', the innate culture people are born into depending on their class. This suggests that those who are in control within society establish the barometer of achievement, which favours those with higher cultural capital.

Studying the education system in the USA, Bowles & Gintis (1976) argue the education system is merely an institution which prepared students to be the workers the capitalist companies required. By reproducing the hierarchy apparent within the work place, Bowles and Gintis (1976) argue the education system teaches students the importance of certain values which the employers require. They argue the education system is merely a “reproduction of the prevailing class structure of society” (Bowles & Gintis 1976, p126). This is termed the ‘correspondence principle’ in which “the structures of school life correspond to the structures of working life” (Giddens, 2009 p836). According to Bowles and Gintis (1976), by studying the close proximity between schools and the workplace it can be seen as merely a system built for working class students to become the workers needed for capitalist companies. By having the values instilled in them of the importance of work, this system creates a never ending supply of the type of workforce the capitalists need to succeed, a “reserve army of skilled labour” (Bowles and Gintis 1976, p55).

A study carried out by Paul Willis showed how the ‘correspondence principle’ worked in practise. Willis looked at a school in Birmingham and found that rather than the education system playing a role in their ultimate employment, the group were aware of the type of work they wanted and dismissed the idea of career progression. Willis (in Giddens 2009, p839) studied a particular group of young white boys in the school. Willis found the group had “an acute and perceptive understanding of the schools authority system – but used this to fight that system rather than work with it”. This indicates the group knew of the options available to them within the

education system but actively rebelled against the system. According to Willis (in Giddens, 2009), whilst they understood employment would be much the same as education, they were also eager to begin this part of their life. It could then be argued that family life can play a significant role in children's views on education, causing them to rebel against the education system that could possibly provide social mobility. By rejecting the idea of education being of importance, the group Willis studied instead used school as a way of preparing to enter employment that many in their peer group and social class were a part of.

According to Bowles and Gintis (1976) the education system operates a 'hidden curriculum' in order to create a workforce which the capitalist companies require. Through this pupils are taught the importance of discipline, hierarchy and acceptance (Giddens, 2009). This theory was first brought to prominence by Ivan Illich, who argued alongside teaching certain subjects, schools teach these values through the social and organisation of relationships within the school (Fulcher and Scott, 2003). This hidden curriculum works in favour of capitalist companies, as it extols the virtues of work being of great importance. According to Giddens (2009) the hidden curriculum, rather than imparting knowledge, instead creates confusion by providing a number of subjects and information. It teaches indifference to the subjects being taught by placing time constraints on classes, being dependent on figures of authority and constant surveillance is taught as normal behaviour, monitoring the students constantly, with for example, homework and registers of attendance. Bowles and Gintis (1976) argue this mirrors life within the workplace, where many workers have individual roles

within the company without knowing what the overall process of production entails.

Ivan Illich was a prominent opponent to schooling for capitalist economies. In Giddens (2009) Illich saw the increase of education providing workers for capitalist companies as a 'deskilling' of society, relying on the results of production rather than education primarily providing knowledge. Illich believed society should retreat from compulsory education. Materials for education should be made available for all at any point, however no curriculum should be in place and society should have more choice over what they learn. Whilst this may be able to take place in a work environment which is offering less employment, it requires a complete change to the society in which live today.

Within conflict theory opinion, the idea of progression via meritocracy is rejected. A person's class is the most important asset in order to obtain the best jobs following education. According to Haralambos and Holborn (2008), education may be available to all people, however once education is complete children of higher classes and who have a more wealthy background, undoubtedly obtain higher qualifications which in turn creates more opportunities within the work environment. By hiding behind the "myth of meritocracy" (Haralambos and Holborn 2008, p604), unsuccessful people are more likely to place blame elsewhere other than the education system. This indicates there is an inherent problem within the education system and opportunities given to the lower classes. It suggests the working class are always a step behind the higher classes who use their wealth and influence to create more opportunities for their children.

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Social action theory or 'interactionism' is another viewpoint taken on the education system. This theory places more importance on how the organisation of these systems is structured and the way in which education is presented to students, primarily by teachers. According Bilton et al (2002) social action theorists believe the interaction towards certain students can influence how these students react and progress through the education system. By labelling a child as a 'trouble maker' for example, influences how interaction with this child may take place. Invariably, students from a lower-class background may be labelled as such, which can be of great detriment to their educational life. This viewpoint is also supported in Burgess and Parker (in Taylor, 2000) and supplemented with the suggestion by labelling these students early in their education, can affect how they see themselves and their role within society. This approach gives more credence to the way in which education is taught within the classroom, rather than how the system and curriculum is influential. The way a teacher interacts with a pupil can be of great influence to how the student sees themselves and could influence their journey through education.

A study carried out by Gillborn and Youdell (cited in Giddens, 2009), shows the social action theory in practise. They indicate the current GCSE system, concerned mostly about achieving grade A\* - C, has led to teachers being placed under undue pressure to spend more of their time on students who they believe have more chance of achieving these grades. This suggests teachers have a pre-ordained idea of ability, deciding which pupils have the ability to gain the grades, rather than teaching every pupil with equal time and effort. Indeed, according to Gillborn and Youdell (in Giddens 2009, p852)

the divisions of class are “ reappearing through language that appears to stress the individual ‘ ability’ of pupils, but actually relies on unstated prejudices about group identities”.

According to Fulcher and Scott (2007) it is argued the economic downturn within Great Britain in the 20th century is due to the wrong kind of workers being produced from the education system. This led to a call for changes to occur within the education system, to make it more appropriate to the needs of the workplace. With less need for manual labour due to decline of industries, further changes were implemented. Modern companies needed more workers who could deal with change and were more versatile, being able to do different job roles at any time. This led to what was termed a ‘ new vocationalism’. In Fulcher and Scott (2007) the changes to the education system in the 1980s were driven by a desire to increase the supply of workers in a changing economy, closely relating the needs within the economy at the time and the requirement of placing students in jobs once education finishes. The conservative governments in the 1980s, according to Giddens (2009), aspired to dismantle the comprehensive school system, believing grammar schools should not have been discarded.

Under the New Labour government which came into power in 1997, further changes occurred. Having previously been opposed to the conservative proposals in the 1980s, Fulcher & Scott (2007) indicate the New Labour government embraced the ethos introduced by the conservatives and did not deviate from it, introducing more layers to the education system leading to an increase of hierarchy. New types of schools were added to the layers of hierarchy with academies, specialised schools and faith schools all being

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encouraged. This increases the likelihood of students receiving a different educational standard based on what school they attend.

Whilst there is evidence of merit based achievement within the education system, this is arguably not the norm. Meritocracy only functions well, if every student is treated equally by all in the education system. The class and cultural background of students can be shown, to have a great influence to the quality of education they receive. Throughout the 20th century, working class students invariably become the workers for capitalist companies, with social mobility seemingly non-existent. The education system in Great Britain has undergone many changes in the 20th century, with the needs of the economy intrinsically linked to them. This is not a hidden agenda, the purpose of the education system is to provide employment for the adult population. The way in which students are taught is perhaps the most important part in education. The popularity of some subjects, could be used as an example of the education system not preferring to teach pupils to be unthinking automatons for a capitalist company to employ. However, there can be no doubt those who come from higher class and wealthier backgrounds than others, invariably succeed more within the education system. Therefore, the education system does not merely prepare us all to serve the powerful, only those who are deemed to be the less deserving of quality education within society.