

# The functionalist view on education (for as level sociology)

[Sociology](#)



“ Asses the contribution of functionalism to our understanding of the role of education” Functionalists take a very positive view of education. They see it as a form of secondary socialisation which is essential to the maintenance of society. Functionalists believe that social institutions including education benefit society and perform functions to maintain a stable society. However there are many different theories to consider. Sociologists such as Durkheim believe that education has two main roles. These are ‘ Creating social solidarity’ and ‘ teaching specialist skills’.

Durkheim believes that social solidarity is created through teaching children shared norms and values. These are taught particularly in history lessons where students learn about their shared heritage. It may also be constructed through wearing school uniform or in American schools, pledging to the American flag. This helps create value consensus and prepares students for work as both children and adults have to work with people who aren't family or friends. Durkheim also establishes the fact that modern industrial society has a very complex division of labour.

He argues that education teaches students specialist skills in order to keep the economy functioning, as students can apply their skills to specific jobs that society needs them to perform. Parsons argues that school is a ‘ bridge ` between family and wider society, especially work. He states that how we are treated in the family is different to how we are treated at work. Therefore schools must prepare children for this change. Parsons claims that in the family a child is judged by particularistic standards (rules that apply only to that child/family) thus their status is ascribed.

However in school and work, children are judged by universalistic standards (rules that apply to everyone equally), which means their status is achieved through passing exams or working towards a promotion. According to Parsons both school and work are meritocratic which means every student and employee has an equal chance in succeeding. Sociologists Davis and Moore argue the main function of education is 'role allocation'. (Making sure people end up in the jobs they are suited to). To do this we need to make sure the most talented students get the most important jobs such as doctors etc.

As these jobs are highly paid, many students try to compete for them in school. Schools then 'sift and sort' people based on their talents and intellect, to ensure the students with the highest valued qualifications achieve the most important jobs. Vocational courses are an example of the functionalist view that education teaches students specialist skills to perform specific jobs. The first type of vocational course was the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) which was formed in the 1980s which unemployed young people had to enrol.

This gave them the work experience they needed to maintain a job. Later forms of vocational courses included BTEC's, NVQ's and vocational A-levels. However YTS has been criticised due to young people not being offered jobs after training. Also, vocational training can be seen as having a lower status and being less academic than courses such as A-levels and Degrees. Functionalists have also been criticised as Marxists argue the norms and values that are passed on through education aren't those of society, but of the ruling class.

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Interactionalists such as Wrong also argue that the functionalist view of education is too deterministic: functionalists assume that students accept the norms and values they are taught in school, when they may reject them. In addition to this there is a lot of evidence that suggests that students don't have an equal chance of succeeding. Gender, social class and ethnicity all have an influence on how well children do in school. In conclusion, functionalists are able to establish the preparation for the workplace which occurs in schools through theories such as Parson's and Durkheim's.

It is clear that education does in fact create value consensus and prepare students for changing attitudes from school to the workplace. However there are flaws in many of these theories. As Wrong states, functionalists ignore the fact that students may reject norms and values, thus the functionalist view on education is too deterministic. There is also evidence that schools are not meritocratic due to influences that gender, social class and ethnicity have on a child's education. Ella Clarke