

### **Functionalist Theories on Education**

Functionalist sociologists have identified education as a crucial part of the socialisation process as it transmits and re-enforces society's norms and values. They have also considered society as a system of interdependent parts that would help to develop the culture and value in society. Education prepares children for crucial roles in the future as adults and they selected for different roles depending on their abilities. Different groups in society teach different norms and values and these groups are called agents of socialisation. Each part of society has particular functions (education, religion, media and family, these four functions work together to construct and contribute to our societal and cultural norms and values.

The famous functionalist sociologist, Emile Durkheim, suggested education prevents anomie (a lack of norms). He stated this because the education system is an agent of socialisation which teaches the importance of norms and values in our society. Durkheim suggested two values which he considered extremely important in society, *Social Solidarity* and *Specialist Skills*. Durkheim suggested that every society needs and sense of solidarity, this is meant by each and every individual within a society must feel they are part of single community. An example of social solidarity within a school would be, students working together in groups, going on trips as a whole year group. Examples outside of school can be, one may feel a sense of solidarity with their own race, gender, culture, etc. Without social solidarity, everyone would become selfish and society would break down. Social solidarity is seen everywhere in our society. People work together to build up confidence and increase work pace. This is why social solidarity is used frequently in schools so the young are prepared for work force in the future.

Furthermore, another value is specialist skills where individuals are taught specialised skills for a certain social division of labour. For example, a lawyer would need literacy and communication skills alongside certain qualifications, whereas a factory worker would need measurement and safety skills. So as result, the government introduced Vocation Education and Training (VET) to ensure the skills are provided to enter work. Qualifications are needed to enter the work force and so different schemes are set up to ensure this such as, NVQ and GNVQ qualifications and vocational A Levels. This value is very important as it ensures every individual is given the opportunity to enhance certain required skills to enter a specific work field. Without these qualification and skills taught through education, work would not run smoothly and so these are taught at a young age and so applied respectively in the future.

Furthermore, another functionalist sociologist called Talcott Parsons suggested his own theory on education which was socialization (teaches norms and values). He suggested in his theory that education teaches to value achieved status over ascribed status. Achieved status is of which an individual has worked hard for (e.g. work to gain high A-levels thus get a good job), whereas ascribed status is being born into a high status (e.g. Prince William). Education encourages values such as individualism, opportunity, equality, competition and achievement. Within a school, these values maybe encouraged through appointing a head boy/ head girl, prefects, school councils, etc. In a meritocratic society, intelligence, ability and effort are rewarded through an achievement in the education system. Meritocracy states that if a person

applies themselves to their work, they will achieve high grades which may lead onto a successful career in the future. Similarly, if a student does not apply themselves to their work or education, they simply do not succeed and achieve high. So everyone is given an equal opportunity and the effort put in to succeed will be the outcome in the future. For example, an A\* student who works hard and achieves high, is more likely to become a doctor, lawyer, accountant, whereas a student who does not put effort in his education is likely to become a road sweeper or a rubbish collector. School acts as a bridge between home and society as there are different principles in the family in comparison to society. This bridge is required as family and society operate on different principles and so children need to learn a new way of living if they are to cope with the wider world. In addition, a child goes from meeting the family's standards (particularistic standards – child judged only by the family) to meeting society's standards (universalistic standards – judged by success (exam grades)). So education encourages us to value universalistic standards and achieved status. This theory is heavily based on capitalism as one should work hard to achieve high and those who don't are of less status. Everyone is given equal opportunity (meritocratic) and those who take advantage succeed whereas those who don't are unsuccessful.

In addition, the final two functionalist sociologists Davis and Moore have suggested the same function of education. This is that education provides role allocation, so that people are allocated depending on their examinations/qualifications to the most appropriate job. Everyone is the opportunity to succeed (meritocracy) and so there is equality. However, Davis and Moore suggest that inequality is necessary in society to ensure those of less capability and least qualifications are given less important jobs (e.g. road sweepers, etc), whereas those of high capability and the most qualifications are given more important jobs (e.g. doctors, etc). Not everyone in society is of the same capability and so people try hard to achieve the very best and so society and select the most talented. Therefore, education sifts and sorts people according to ability. Just as the theory in the above paragraph, this theory is also a meritocratic stance as it enables each person to be allocated to the best job suited to their abilities. Those who go school/college and work hard will succeed and get good jobs in the future, however, those who bunk school/college will get no qualifications resulting in poor jobs in the future. This theory would ensure that society would be able to provide doctors, lawyers, road sweepers, rubbish collectors, etc. So as a whole, this theory is suggesting that education filters out individuals depending on their capabilities, higher the capability and the most qualification get the best jobs. On the other hand, those with the less capabilities and least qualification get the poorest jobs.

In conclusion, the four functionalist sociologists have given theories which are understandable as well as applied in modern society. However, some may argue that the functionalist perspective of education is not accurate and some may say that it is. Those who say that it is accurate argue that majority of people want to work hard and have a good job in the future. Those who argue against the accuracy of the functionalist perspective of education say that there are certain subgroups such as criminals who do not want to work hard and gain qualifications towards a good job. We live in a capitalist society and so all the theories discussed above are implemented in our society today. Every individual is given an equal opportunity to succeed, some take that opportunity and some don't. Our society needs doctors as well as road sweepers, without them society wouldn't function properly.