

Functionalism

& Education

Functionalist Perspective

- Concerned with functions of education in society
- Maintenance of social stability through value consensus, social harmony & cohesion
- Links between education & other social institutions
- Key thinkers: Durkheim, Parsons
- 4 basic functions of education

1) Passing on culture

- Transmission of society's norms, values & culture
 - Through school subjects & the hidden curriculum
- Unity through shared values

2) Bridge between family & society

- Durkheim – schools as “society in miniature”
- Parsons – unit of secondary socialisation
- Bridging the gap & managing the transition from the Family
 - “Particularistic” values
 - Ascribed status
 - To wider society
 - “Universalistic” values
 - Achieved status

3) Provision of workforce

- Education as preparation for work
 - Qualifications
 - Training
- Maintenance of labour supply suitable for wide range of different jobs – specialised division of labour
- Those best qualified end up in the best jobs

4) Legitimation of social inequality

- Davis & Moore (1945) – education as a means of selecting & sifting
 - Role allocation through streaming, setting, testing – fitting people into the hierarchy
- Meritocracy of education legitimises inequality of success

Functionalist

- Passes on society's culture – social cohesion
- Provides bridge between family & society
- Provides trained & qualified labour force
- Effective role selection & allocation
- Legitimises social inequality

Criticisms

- Marxists/Feminists: ignores power inequalities & conflict
- Is society based on universalistic values & meritocracy?
- Is education relevant? Collins (1972) – skills learnt on the job
- Education system is not meritocratic – influence of class, ethnicity & gender
- Bowles & Gintis (1976) system disguises inequality of opportunity

Further Reading

- Sociology in Perspective pp.186-187
- Introducing Sociology for AS-Level, Browne (2002), pp.199-202
- Sociology for AS-Level, Moore (2002), p.67
- Sociology: Themes & Perspectives (5th ed), Haralambos & Holborn (2000) pp.777-780
- Sociology in Focus, Taylor et al (1995) pp.287-8