Discuss the Marxist perspective of education

A popular debate in sociology concerns the roles and functions of education. An important view to consider is that of the Marxists. Marxists believe the ruling class use institutions such as schools to oppress the working class and prevent a revolution.

Support for the Marxist view can be found from Althusser. He said education it is no wonder middle class students do better in school because it is an ideological state apparatus, which means it is a tool used by the bourgeoisie to teach their ideas to the proletariat. Althusser says that education uses middle class language codes, supported by the work of Bernstein, therefore middle class students will naturally do better in exams. This supports the idea that the purpose of education is to oppress the working class.

Further support comes from Bourdieu who says that middle class students perform better at school because they share the same norms and values as the middle class teachers. He argues that middle class students are culturally equipped to do well at school. This is called cultural capital. Bourdieu also argues that education serves the ruling class even further by cultural reproduction. This means teaching the same norms and values over and over again to generations of proletariat students so they will become subservient workers. The ruling class choose the curriculum which means we learn ethnocentric topics which teach us how capitalism is good in subtle ways. For example in History we learn that because Britain is powerful due to capitalism we were able to defeat Nazi Germany in World War 2. We also only learn languages which would be beneficial for the workplace because we trade with select countries. This supports the Marxist view that education is used to create good proletarian workers but to be slightly disadvantaged so they do not revolt against the bourgeoisie.

Bowles and Gintis also support the Marxist view. They believe that besides the National Curriculum there is also a hidden curriculum which consists of the working class learning to be obedient and respect authority if they become subservient workers. Their correspondence theory says that schools mirror the workforce so that when students leave school they are well equipped to be good workers. They give examples in the fragmentation of the school day, wanting to have rewards, being subservient workers and accepting a hierarchy for example the head teacher reflecting the boss.

Willis critiques Bowles and Gintis by saying they ignore the actual curriculum and the subjects which teach us about capitalism and being oppressed for example sociology. Willis also did a study on 12 “lads” who formed an anti-school culture. These working class boys rejected the hierarchy and believed they were superior to their teachers. This does not support the Marxist idea that education is used to create obedient proletariat workers.

However a counter critique of Willis is that he only looked at 12 working class boys in Birmingham. Due to the small, gender blind sample it would unrealistic to generalise to the whole population.

Another important sociological perspective to consider is that of the functionalists. They believe education benefits everybody, not just the ruling class. A major criticism of functionalists is that they ignore when education is dysfunctional and does not benefit the individual or society, for example “sink schools”.