

Evaluate the view that while Marxist and functionalist approaches focus on similar issues, they reach very different conclusions about the role of education (30 marks)

Education in schools have very important effects on society such as transmitting norms and values. However, sociologists do not agree on how to decipher these effects. Functionalists and Marxists both believe the education system benefits everyone, but have contrasting views on how they benefit society. Functionalists believe that education helps the functioning and stability of society and teaching specialist skills, whereas Marxist who are conflict theorists believe that education is a perpetrator of inequality between the working class and middle class members of society.

A functionalist called Emile Durkheim believes that the education system introduces the importance of social solidarity in society. Social solidarity is when individual members feel part of a community or a 'body'. He believes that social life would be impossible without social solidarity amongst people, as individuals would pursue their own selfish desires without social life or cooperation if they did not feel part of a community. Education teaches this as it transmits society's culture by sharing beliefs and values from generation to generation. An example of this is when students are given history lessons on their country's heritage to employ patriotism and make them feel connected and committed to their social group who they share a background with. School is also important as it acts as a 'miniature society'. When children grow up they are faced with the real world in which they must use team work and cooperate with other people such as colleagues or their family.

Durkheim also argues that the role of education is to teach specialist skills. In the industrial society, the work place requires social solidarity and team work. This is because the division of labour and specialisation means that each person is assigned to a specific task which requires a set of skills. Each person in the workforce must bring a skill and work together as a team to be productive. For this reason, education is a huge contributor to serving the needs of the workplace as it provides and prepares students for the skills necessary for the social division of labour.

Another functionalist called Parsons takes on many of Durkheim's beliefs. He sees school as the focal agent of socialisation and acting as a bridge between one's family and wider society. It is an opportunity for people to connect with the wider world and see society, as people come from all different backgrounds. Within a family, the rules that are applied to a child are particularistic. This means that the regulations put in place apply only to that one child. However, in school the laws are applicable to each student and there are universal standards. An example is that each student faces the same consequence for bad behaviour and have the same pass rate for the same exam. People are judged against the same standards in contrast to having particularistic rules set in the family which are just for one child. Moreover, in the family, a child's status is ascribed and they are born with it. But, by contrast in school a child would mainly be judged on achieved status and how well they did by working hard and their own individual efforts rather than it being fixed by birth in the family. Therefore, Parsons sees the role of education as preparing us to enter wider society because school and society are both based on meritocracy and each person has their own opportunity to achieve rewards through their own ability and efforts.