

AS Sociology Essay: "Assess the View that the Education System Exists Mainly to Select and Prepare Young People for their Future Work Roles"

The view of the education system existing to prepare the youth for their future roles has been justified, whilst allowing for alternative points of view – these shall be explored.

Durkheim (1903) identified two main functions of education: to create social solidarity and teach specialist skills. Social solidarity refers to the individual members of society feeling integrated in the community – Durkheim states this is necessary to promote cooperation otherwise individual's would lose altruistic motives, and justifies this as education shares the society's beliefs and values through the generations, hence instilling a shared sense of commitment to society. Furthermore, school is a microcosm for life in wider society as similarly to the work environment, cooperative relationships and an affable nature allows for progression and a generally harmonious life. Linking in with this social solidarity is the teaching of special skills, allowing individuals to play their role in the division of labour, with education essentially preparing young people for their future work roles, thus some functionalists agree with the view to an extent.

In the same vein, Parsons (1961), another functionalist, believes that school prepares individuals to transition from the family to wider society as school and society are based on meritocratic principles, whereby everyone is judged the same and made to obey a series of rules. He also claims that schools provide a secondary function in selecting and assigning students to their future work roles by assessing their abilities.

Davis and Moore (1945) agree with education being a tool for selection and preparing young people for their future work roles as tests and qualifications are used to determine which individuals are most qualified for certain jobs (e.g. certain people are not suitable for the role of air traffic control). Blau and Duncan (1978) also state that the modern economy uses workers' skills to maintain its financial integrity, which is best ensured by the meritocratic system that allows for the most suited individual to gain higher positions in the socio-economic ladder.

The New Right perspective states that education should socialise learners into shared values to allow for a sense of national identity (an example of this is the teaching of British literature in British schools), similarly to Durkheim's point of social solidarity. However, the thinkers believe that the current education system is failing to achieve these goals as it is governed by the state.

On the other hand, Althusser (1971) argues that the education system performs two functions: to perpetuate class inequality by failing to allow the working-class pupils to progress; and to justify this inequality through the propagation of a belief that inequality is inevitable – this therefore reduces the chance of opposition to the capitalist way of thinking. Additionally, Bowles and Gintis studied 237 New York high school students and other studies' findings, concluding that students who showed obedience and discipline (key traits for a compliant worker in later life) scored higher on tests (in contrast to those who exhibited independent traits, who scored lower on tests), hence showing that the education system perpetuates inequality and rewards those who show obedient traits, thus reducing the opposition to the capitalist ruling class.

Bowles and Gintis also argue that education serves to teach, so to speak, the 'hidden' curriculum (consisting of punctuality; obedience for institutional rules; moral values). It is through this that the education system prepared young people for their role as the exploited workers of the future. Furthermore, the education system produces the 'myth of meritocracy', which states that it is equal and allows for anyone to succeed, however this is an untruth as evidence shows that the key factor determining an individual's income is their socio-economic background. In essence, this shows that most Marxists see education as a system to reproduce and justify class inequality.

However, many feminists believe that education exists to perpetuate the patriarchy in society. Heaton and Lawson (1996) state that the aforementioned 'hidden' curriculum is a source of gender socialisation within schools whereby schools display books that show males being dominant within the family; males and females having different sports in Physical Education lessons; males tending to dominate the senior management; as well as teachers expectations in that males are still requested to move furniture around, which is a prevalent sexist attitude. Liberal feminists state that this patriarchy will end through changes in educational policies, whilst Radical feminists argue that it can only end when women are freed from the negative influence and violence that men inflict on women, physically and emotionally.

Many postmodernists believe that adult education has become more of a leisure activity rather a goal oriented activity, which is in part due to the decentring of knowledge, which sees education as moving away from the belief of any knowledge being superior to other forms of knowledge (this is mirrored in the plentiful range of courses for adults). It's also seen as less well defined as individuals have different perspectives on it – ranging from leisure to work.

Conversely, interactionists tend to focus on symbolic interactionism, which states that a socially constructed identity is formed via perceptions of how others see oneself, which can become a self fulfilling prophecy. This is evidenced by how Beynon (1985) found that at three classifications arose ('good kids'; 'teachers' pets'; and 'bullies') after just three months of secondary school. Ultimately, this shows that many interpretivists emphasise the prominence of the interaction (that education provides) occurring in school settings, as opposed to the goals of preparing young people for their work roles as adults.

In conclusion, many functionalists agree with this view to an extent, whilst feminists take the side of education perpetuating patriarchy, with post modernists viewing education as less of a preparation device for adulthood and more of a leisure activity in regards to adult education. This is subverted by the Marxists, who see education as system which strives to conserve and justify class inequality so as to prevent the subversion of the capitalist system.