

TOPIC 5



There are winners and losers in education – but does everyone face the same hurdles?

GETTING STARTED

The picture illustrates the fact that there are winners and losers in education. In pairs or small groups, answer the following:

- 1 Previous Topics show that schools and teachers may treat pupils unfairly e.g. by negative labelling. Can you list some of the ways the education system treats pupils *fairly*?
- 2 Make a list of things you have learned in school that you feel will help you succeed in working life, e.g. particular knowledge, skills, attitudes or behaviours. Give reasons for your answers.

Learning objectives

After studying this Topic, you should:

- Know the functions of education that functionalists identify.
- Understand the neoliberal and New Right views of the role of the market in education.
- Understand different Marxist views of the role of education, particularly the reproduction and legitimization of class inequality.
- Be able to evaluate the functionalist, neoliberal and New Right, and Marxist views of education.

THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN SOCIETY

When studying the role of education in society, sociologists are interested in questions such as:

- How far does education provide all individuals with equal opportunities for achievement?
- How far does education recreate existing social class inequalities?
- In what ways does education serve the needs of the economy?
- What kinds of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values does education transmit?

As we shall see, sociologists hold conflicting views on these questions. Often, this is because they have different sociological perspectives or viewpoints that see society differently. In this Topic, we focus on the following perspectives or theories of the role of education in society:

- **Functionalism** – a consensus approach
- **Neoliberalism and the New Right** – a conservative, free market approach
- **Marxism** – a class conflict approach.

The functionalist perspective on education

Functionalism is based on the view that society is a system of interdependent parts held together by a shared culture or value consensus – an agreement among society's members about what values are important. Each part of society, such as the family, economy or education system, performs functions that help to maintain society as a whole. When studying education, functionalists seek to discover what functions it performs – that is, what does it do to help meet society's needs?

Durkheim: solidarity and skills

The French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1903), the founder of functionalist sociology, identified two main functions of education: creating social solidarity and teaching specialist skills.

Social solidarity

Durkheim argues that society needs a sense of solidarity; that is, its individual members must feel themselves to be part of a single 'body' or community. He argues that without social solidarity, social life and cooperation would be impossible because each individual would pursue their own selfish desires.

The education system helps to create social solidarity by transmitting society's culture – its shared beliefs and values – from one generation to the next. For example, Durkheim argues that the teaching of a country's history instils in children a sense of a shared heritage and a commitment to the wider social group.

School also acts as a 'society in miniature', preparing us for life in wider society. For example, both in school and at work we have to cooperate with people who are neither family nor friends – teachers and pupils at school, colleagues and customers at work. Similarly, both in school and at work we have to interact with others according to a set of impersonal rules that apply to everyone.

Specialist skills

Modern industrial economies have a complex division of labour, where the production of even a single item usually involves the cooperation of many different specialists. This cooperation promotes social solidarity but, for it to be successful, each person must have the necessary specialist knowledge and skills to perform their role. Durkheim argues that education teaches individuals the specialist knowledge and skills that they need to play their part in the social division of labour.

Parsons: meritocracy

The American functionalist Talcott Parsons (1961) draws on many of Durkheim's ideas. Parsons sees the school as the 'focal socialising agency' in modern society, acting as a bridge between the family and wider society. This bridge is needed because family and society operate on different principles, so children need to learn a new way of living if they are to cope with the wider world.

Within the family, the child is judged by particularistic standards; that is, rules that apply only to that particular child. Similarly, in the family, the child's status is ascribed; that is, fixed by birth. For example, an elder son and a younger daughter may be given different rights or duties because of differences of age and sex.

By contrast, both school and wider society judge us all by the same universalistic and impersonal standards. For example, in society, the same laws apply to everyone. Similarly, in school each pupil is judged against the same standards (for example, they all sit the same exam and the pass mark is the same for everyone).

Likewise, in both school and wider society, a person's status is largely achieved, not ascribed. For example, at work we gain promotion or get the sack on the strength of how good we are at our job, while at school we pass or fail through our own individual efforts.

Parsons sees school as preparing us to move from the family to wider society because school and society are both based on meritocratic principles. In a meritocracy, everyone is given an equal opportunity, and individuals achieve rewards through their own effort and ability.

Davis and Moore: role allocation

Functionalists argue that schools also perform the function of selecting and allocating pupils to their future work roles. By assessing individuals' aptitudes and abilities, schools help to match them to the job they are best suited to.

Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore (1945) see education as a device for selection and role allocation. They focus on the relationship between education and social inequality.

Investigating meritocracy in education

The issue of meritocracy in education has certain important **research characteristics** – particular features that may make it easy or difficult to investigate. For example:

- Schools wish to project an image of offering equal opportunities to all their students. Head teachers are unlikely to welcome research that might undermine this image.
- Teachers may feel unable to reveal anything about their school that contradicts its meritocratic image.
- The state education system produces a great deal of statistical data about examination results, pupils on free school meals, gender and ethnicity. This information is highly relevant to the study of meritocracy.
- However, much of this official data does not relate directly to investigating meritocracy. For example, it does not specifically reveal links between parents' social class and their children's educational and employment outcomes.
- Furthermore, similar data from the private education sector is less readily available.
- Some important groups within education, parents and pupils in particular, may not be aware of the degree of inequality in their educational experiences, so it may be pointless questioning them about it.

- 1 What other research characteristics of meritocracy in education can you think of? You could consider issues of access to results data, ethical concerns etc particular to investigating this topic.
- 2 Using the research characteristics listed above and any others you can think of, identify two strengths and two limitations of using **official statistics** to investigate meritocracy in education. You can read more about official statistics on pages 149–59.

They argue that inequality is necessary to ensure that the most important roles in society are filled by the most talented people. For example, it would be inefficient and dangerous to have less able people performing roles such as surgeon or airline pilot. Not everyone is equally talented, so society has to offer higher rewards for these jobs. This will encourage everyone to compete for them and society can then select the most talented individuals to fill these positions.

Education plays a key part in this process, since it acts as a proving ground for ability. Put simply, education is where individuals show what they can do. It 'sifts and sorts' us according to our ability. The most able gain the highest qualifications, which then gives them entry to the most important and highly rewarded positions.

Human capital Similarly, Peter Blau and Otis Duncan (1978) argue that a modern economy depends for its prosperity on using its 'human capital' – its workers' skills. They argue that a meritocratic education system does this best, since it enables each person to be allocated to the job best suited to their abilities. This will make most effective use of their talents and maximise their productivity.

Evaluation of the functionalist perspective

- The education system does not teach specialised skills adequately, as Durkheim claims. For example, the Wolf review of vocational education (2011) claims that high-quality apprenticeships are rare and up to a third of 16–19 year olds are on courses that do not lead to higher education or good jobs.
- As **Topics 1–4** show, there is ample evidence that equal opportunity in education does not exist. For example, achievement is greatly influenced by class background rather than ability.
- Melvin Tumin (1953) criticises Davis and Moore for putting forward a circular argument: How do we know that a job is important? Answer: because it's highly rewarded. Why are some jobs more highly rewarded? Answer: because they are more important!
- Functionalists see education as a process that instils the shared values of society as a whole, but Marxists argue that education in capitalist society only transmits the ideology of a minority – the ruling class.
- The interactionist Dennis Wrong (1961) argues that functionalists have an 'over-socialised view' of people as mere puppets of society. Functionalists wrongly imply that pupils passively accept all they are taught and never reject the school's values.
- Neoliberals and the New Right argue that the state education system fails to prepare young people adequately for work. We deal with their view next.

Neoliberalism and the New Right perspective on education

Neoliberalism is an economic doctrine that has had a major influence on education policy. Neoliberals argue that the state should not provide services such as education, health and welfare. Neoliberal ideas have influenced all governments since 1979 – whether Conservative, Labour or Coalition.

Neoliberalism is based on the idea that the state must not dictate to individuals how to dispose of their own property, and should not try to regulate a free-market economy. So governments should encourage competition, privatise state-run businesses and deregulate markets.

Neoliberals argue that the value of education lies in how well it enables the country to compete in the global marketplace. They claim that this can only be achieved if schools become more like businesses, empowering parents and pupils as consumers and using competition between schools to drive up standards.

The New Right

The New Right is a conservative political view that incorporates neoliberal economic ideas. A central principle of New Right thinking is the belief that the state cannot meet people's needs and that people are best left to meet their own needs through the free market. For this reason, the New Right favour the marketisation of education (see **Topic 6**).

There are similarities between the New Right and functionalist views:

- Both believe that some people are naturally more talented than others.
- Both favour an education system run on meritocratic principles of open competition, and one that serves the needs of the economy by preparing young people for work.
- Both believe that education should socialise pupils into shared values, such as competition, and instil a sense of national identity.

However, a key difference with functionalism is that the New Right do not believe that the current education system is achieving these goals. The reason for its failure, in their view, is that it is run by the state.

The New Right argue that state education systems take a 'one size fits all' approach, imposing uniformity and disregarding local needs. The local consumers who use the schools – pupils, parents and employers – have no say. State education systems are therefore unresponsive and inefficient. Schools that waste money or get poor results are not answerable to their consumers. This means lower standards of achievement for pupils, a less qualified workforce and a less prosperous economy.

The New Right's solution to these problems is the marketisation of education – creating an 'education market'. They believe that competition between schools and empowering consumers will bring greater diversity, choice and efficiency to schools and increase schools' ability to meet the needs of pupils, parents and employers.

Chubb and Moe: consumer choice

A good example of the New Right perspective on education comes from the work of the Americans, John Chubb and Terry Moe (1990). They argue that state-run education in the United States has failed because:

- It has not created equal opportunity and has failed the needs of disadvantaged groups.
- It is inefficient because it fails to produce pupils with the skills needed by the economy.
- Private schools deliver higher quality education because, unlike state schools, they are answerable to paying consumers – the parents.

Chubb and Moe base their arguments on a comparison of the achievements of 60,000 pupils from low-income families in 1,015 state and private high schools, together with the findings of a parent survey and case studies of 'failing' schools apparently being 'turned around'. Their evidence shows that pupils from low-income families consistently do about 5% better in private than in state schools.

Based on these findings, Chubb and Moe call for the introduction of a market system in state education that would put control in the hands of the consumers (parents and local communities). They argue that this would allow consumers to shape schools to meet their own needs and would improve quality and efficiency.

To introduce a market into state education, Chubb and Moe propose a system in which each family would be given a voucher to spend on buying education from a school of their choice. This would force schools to become more responsive to parents' wishes, since the vouchers would be the school's main source of income. Like private businesses, schools would have to compete to attract 'customers' by improving their 'product'.

These principles are already at work in the private education sector. In Chubb and Moe's view, educational standards would be greatly improved by introducing the same market forces into the state sector.

Analysis and Evaluation

In what ways might a voucher system increase class inequalities in education?

Two roles for the state

However, while the New Right stress the importance of market forces in education, this does not mean they see no role at all for the state. In the New Right view, there remain two important roles for the state.

- Firstly, the state imposes a framework on schools within which they have to compete. For example, by publishing Ofsted inspection reports and league tables of schools' exam results, the state gives parents information with which to make a more informed choice between schools.
- Secondly, the state ensures that schools transmit a shared culture. By imposing a single National Curriculum, it seeks to guarantee that schools socialise pupils into a single cultural heritage.

The New Right believe that education should affirm the national identity. For example, the curriculum should emphasise Britain's positive role in world history and teach British literature, and there should be a Christian act of worship in school each day because Christianity is Britain's main religion. The aim is to integrate pupils into a single set of traditions and cultural values. For this reason, the New Right also oppose multicultural education that reflects the cultures of the different minority groups in Britain.

Evaluation of the New Right perspective

- Gewirtz (1995) and Ball (1994) both argue that competition between schools benefits the middle class, who can use their cultural and economic capital to gain access to more desirable schools.
- Critics argue that the real cause of low educational standards is not state control but social inequality and inadequate funding of state schools.
- There is a contradiction between the New Right's support for parental choice on the one hand and the state imposing a compulsory national curriculum on all its schools on the other.
- Marxists argue that education does not impose a shared national culture, as the New Right claim, but imposes the culture of a dominant minority ruling class and devalues the culture of the working class and minority ethnic groups.

Activity Discussion

Does introducing the market into education benefit everyone?

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The Marxist perspective on education

Where functionalists see society and education as based on value consensus, Marxists see it as based on class division and capitalist exploitation. Karl Marx (1818–83) described capitalism as a two-class system:

- **The capitalist class** or bourgeoisie are the minority class. They are the employers who own the means of production (land, factories, machinery, offices etc). They make their profits by exploiting the labour of the majority – the proletariat or working class.
- **The working class** are forced to sell their labour power to the capitalists since they own no means of production of their own and so have no other source of income. As a result, work under capitalism is poorly paid, alienating, unsatisfying, and something over which workers have no real control.

This creates the potential for class conflict. For example, if workers realise they are being exploited, they may demand higher wages, better working conditions or even the abolition of capitalism itself. Marx believed that ultimately the proletariat would unite to overthrow the capitalist system and create a classless, equal society.

However, despite this potential for revolution that capitalism contains, it is able to continue because the bourgeoisie

also control the state. A key component of the state is the education system, and Marxists see education as functioning to prevent revolution and maintain capitalism.

Althusser: the ideological state apparatus

Marxists see the state as the means by which the capitalist ruling class maintain their dominant position. According to Louis Althusser (1971), the state consists of two elements or 'apparatuses', both of which serve to keep the bourgeoisie in power:

- **The repressive state apparatuses** (RSAs), which maintain the rule of the bourgeoisie by force or the threat of it. The RSAs include the police, courts and army. When necessary, they use physical coercion (force) to repress the working class.
- **The ideological state apparatuses** (ISAs), which maintain the rule of the bourgeoisie by controlling people's ideas, values and beliefs. The ISAs include religion, the media and the education system.

In Althusser's view, the education system is an important ISA. He argues that it performs two functions:

- Education **reproduces** class inequality by transmitting it from generation to generation, by failing each successive generation of working-class pupils in turn.
- Education **legitimises** (justifies) class inequality by producing ideologies (sets of ideas and beliefs) that disguise its true cause. The function of ideology is to persuade workers to accept that inequality is inevitable and that they deserve their subordinate position in society. If they accept these ideas, they are less likely to challenge or threaten capitalism.

Bowles and Gintis: schooling in capitalist America

The American Marxists Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1976) develop these ideas further. They argue that capitalism requires a workforce with the kind of attitudes, behaviour and personality-type suited to their role as alienated and exploited workers willing to accept hard work, low pay and orders from above. In the view of Bowles and Gintis, this is the role of the education system in capitalist

Investigating the reproduction of class inequality

The issue of the reproduction of class inequality has certain important **research characteristics** – particular features that may make it easy or difficult to investigate. For example:

- Since schools do not track and record the careers of their ex-pupils, there is no ready-made data for researchers to use.
- Contacting former pupils may be difficult both because any addresses the school still holds for them may be out of date, and because researchers may not be given access to this information anyway.
- But fee-paying schools often have old boys/girls associations through which contact with former pupils could be made.
- Former pupils now in working-class jobs may feel they are being viewed as a failure or patronised by a middle-class researcher.
- Schools may be defensive about the occupational futures of their pupils for fear of being seen as having failed them.
- Former pupils may not know the reasons why they get working-class jobs or may see them in very simple terms such as 'I didn't work hard at school'.

- 1 What other research characteristics of the reproduction of class inequality can you think of? You could consider issues of gatekeepers, ethical concerns etc particular to investigating this topic.
- 2 Using the research characteristics listed above and any others you can think of, identify two strengths and two limitations of using **questionnaires** to investigate the reproduction of class inequality. You can read more about questionnaires on pages 116–123.

society – to reproduce an obedient workforce that will accept inequality as inevitable.

From their own study of 237 New York high school students and the findings of other studies, Bowles and Gintis conclude that schools reward precisely the kind of personality traits that make for a submissive, compliant worker. For instance, they found that students who showed independence and creativity tended to gain low grades, while those who showed characteristics linked to obedience and discipline (such as punctuality) tended to gain high grades.

Bowles and Gintis conclude from this evidence that schooling helps to produce the obedient workers that capitalism needs. They do not believe that education fosters personal development. Rather, it stunts and distorts students' development.

The correspondence principle and the hidden curriculum

Bowles and Gintis argue that there are close parallels between schooling and work in capitalist society. Both schools and workplaces are hierarchies, with head teachers or bosses at the top making decisions and giving orders, and workers or pupils at the bottom obeying. **Box 8** shows some other ways in which school mirrors the workplace. As Bowles and Gintis put it, schooling takes place in 'the long shadow of work'.

Bowles and Gintis refer to these parallels between school and workplace as examples of the 'correspondence principle'. The relationships and structures found in education mirror or correspond to those of work.

Bowles and Gintis argue that the correspondence principle operates through the hidden curriculum – that is, all the 'lessons' that are learnt in school without being directly taught. For example, simply through the everyday workings of the school, pupils become accustomed to accepting hierarchy and competition, working for extrinsic rewards and so on.

In this way, schooling prepares working-class pupils for their role as the exploited workers of the future, reproducing the workforce capitalism needs and perpetuating class inequality from generation to generation.

For example, Phil Cohen (1984) argues that youth training schemes serve capitalism by teaching young workers not genuine job skills, but rather the attitudes and values needed in a subordinate labour force. It lowers their aspirations so that they will accept low paid work.

Application

Bowles and Gintis claim that schooling prepares pupils for their future work roles. How might it also prepare them for their future **gender** roles?

The myth of meritocracy: the legitimization of class inequality

Because capitalist society is based on inequality, there is always a danger that the poor will feel that this inequality is undeserved and unfair, and that they will rebel against the system responsible for it. In Bowles and Gintis' view, the education system helps to prevent this from happening, by legitimating class inequalities. It does this by producing ideologies that serve to explain and justify why inequality is fair, natural and inevitable.

Bowles and Gintis describe the education system as 'a giant myth-making machine'. A key myth that education promotes is the 'myth of meritocracy'. Meritocracy means that everyone has an equal opportunity to achieve, that rewards are based on ability and effort, and that those who gain the highest rewards deserve them because they are the most able and hardworking.

Unlike functionalists such as Parsons, Bowles and Gintis argue that meritocracy does not in fact exist. Evidence shows that the main factor determining whether or not someone has a high income is their family and class background, not their ability or educational achievement.

By disguising this fact, the myth of meritocracy serves to justify the privileges of the higher classes, making it seem that they gained them through succeeding in open and fair competition at school. This helps persuade the working class to accept inequality as legitimate, and makes it less likely that they will seek to overthrow capitalism.

The education system also justifies poverty, through what Bowles and Gintis describe as the 'poor-are-dumb' theory of failure. It does so by blaming poverty on the individual, rather than blaming capitalism ('I'm poor because I wasn't clever enough/didn't work hard enough at school'). It therefore plays an important part in reconciling workers to their exploited position, making them less likely to rebel against the system.

Activity Media

Fordism and the correspondence principle

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Willis: learning to labour

All Marxists agree that capitalism cannot function without a workforce that is willing to accept exploitation. Likewise, all Marxists see education as reproducing and legitimating class inequality. That is, it ensures that working-class pupils are slotted into and learn to accept jobs that are poorly paid and alienating.

However, whereas Bowles and Gintis see education as a fairly straightforward process of indoctrination into the myth of meritocracy, Paul Willis' (1977) study shows that working-class pupils can resist such attempts to indoctrinate them.

As a Marxist, Willis is interested in the way schooling serves capitalism. However, he combines this with an interactionist approach that focuses on the meanings pupils give to their situation and how these enable them to resist indoctrination.

Box 8 The correspondence principle

School in capitalist society	reflects	work in capitalist society
Hierarchy of authority among teachers (e.g. head – deputy – classroom teacher) and between teachers and students	reflects	hierarchy of authority in the workplace (e.g. managers – supervisors – workers).
Alienation through students' lack of control over education (e.g. over what to study, timetabling)	reflects	alienation through workers' lack of control over production (e.g. managers decide what, how, when and where to produce).
Extrinsic satisfaction (rewards external to the work itself), e.g. from grades, rather than from interest in the subjects studied	reflects	extrinsic satisfaction, e.g. from pay, rather than from doing the job itself.
Fragmentation and compartmentalisation of knowledge into unconnected subjects	reflects	fragmentation of work through the division of labour into small, meaningless tasks.
Competition and divisions among students, e.g. to come top of class; to be in a higher stream	reflects	competition and divisions among the workforce, e.g. through differences in status and pay.
Levels of education (streams, year groups)	reflects	levels of the occupational structure
- lower levels: few choices; close supervision - higher levels: trusted to get on with work; self-directed learning		- lower levels: workers closely supervised; given orders. - higher levels: workers internalise company's goals; self-supervision.

The lads' counter-culture

Using qualitative research methods including participant observation and unstructured interviews, Willis studied the counter-school culture of 'the lads' – a group of 12 working-class boys – as they make the transition from school to work.

The lads form a distinct counter-culture opposed to the school. They are scornful of the conformist boys who they call the 'ear'oles' (so called because, unlike the lads, they listen to what the teachers tell them). The lads have their own brand of intimidatory humour, 'taking the piss' out of the ear'oles and girls.

The lads find school boring and meaningless and they flout its rules and values, for example by smoking and drinking, disrupting classes and playing truant. For the lads, such acts of defiance are ways of resisting the school. They reject as a 'con' the school's meritocratic ideology that working-class pupils can achieve middle-class jobs through hard work.

Willis notes the similarity between the lads' anti-school counter-culture and the shopfloor culture of male manual workers. Both cultures see manual work as superior and intellectual work as inferior and effeminate. The lads identify strongly with male manual work and this explains why they see themselves as superior both to girls and to the 'effeminate' ear'oles who aspire to non-manual jobs.

However, it also explains why the lads' counter-culture of resistance to school helps them to slot into the very jobs – inferior in terms of skill, pay and conditions – that capitalism needs someone to perform. For example:

- Having been accustomed to boredom and to finding ways of amusing themselves in school, they don't expect satisfaction from work and are good at finding diversions to cope with the tedium of unskilled labour.
- Their acts of rebellion guarantee that they will end up in unskilled jobs, by ensuring their failure to gain worthwhile qualifications.

For Willis, the irony is that by helping them resist the school's ideology, the lads' counter-culture ensures that they are destined for the unskilled work that capitalism needs someone to perform.

Evaluation of Marxist approaches

Marxist approaches are useful in exposing the 'myth of meritocracy'. They show the role that education plays as an ideological state apparatus, serving the interests of capitalism by reproducing and legitimating class inequality.

However, as Box 9 shows, postmodernists criticise Bowles and Gintis' correspondence principle on the grounds that today's post-Fordist economy requires schools to produce a



▲ Fordism: assembly line mass production at the Ford plant in Detroit, Michigan, 1940. How typical is this of industry today?

very different kind of labour force from the one described by Marxists. Postmodernists argue that education now reproduces diversity, not inequality.

Marxists disagree with one another about how reproduction and legitimation take place. Bowles and Gintis take a deterministic view. That is, they assume that pupils have no free will and passively accept indoctrination. This approach fails to explain why many pupils reject the school's values.

By contrast, Willis rejects the view that school simply 'brainwashes' pupils into passively accepting their fate. By combining Marxist and interactionist approaches, he shows how pupils may resist the school and yet how this still leads them into working-class jobs.

However, critics argue that Willis' account of the 'lads' romanticises them, portraying them as working-class heroes despite their anti-social behaviour and sexist attitudes. His small-scale study of only 12 boys in one school is also unlikely to be representative of other pupils' experience and it would be risky to generalise his findings.

Critical modernists such as Raymond Morrow and Carlos Torres (1998) criticise Marxists for taking a 'class first' approach that sees class as the key inequality and ignores all other kinds.

Instead, like postmodernists, Morrow and Torres argue that society is now more diverse. They see non-class inequalities, such as ethnicity, gender and sexuality, as equally important. They argue that sociologists must explain how education reproduces and legitimates all forms of inequality, not just class, and how the different forms of inequality are inter-related.

CHAPTER 2

Feminists make a similar point. For example, as Madeleine MacDonald (1980) argues, Bowles and Gintis ignore the fact that schools reproduce not only capitalism, but patriarchy too. Similarly, as Angela McRobbie (1978) points out, females are largely absent from Willis' study.

However, Willis' work has stimulated a great deal of research into how education reproduces and legitimates other inequalities. For example, Paul Connolly (1998) explores how education reproduces both ethnic and gender inequalities. Other studies of the inter-relationships between different forms of inequality include Sewell, Evans and Mac an Ghaill (see pages 38, 56 and 63).

Box 9

Post-Fordism and postmodernism

The correspondence principle states that school mirrors the workplace. Capitalism requires low-skilled workers willing to put up with alienating work on mass production assembly lines. This system is often called **Fordism** because the Ford Motor Company was the first to introduce it. Bowles and Gintis see the education system as preparing pupils to accept this work.

However, postmodernists argue that the Marxist view is outdated. They claim that society has entered a postmodern phase where class divisions are no longer important. Society is now much more diverse and fragmented, and the economy is now based on 'flexible specialisation', where production is customised for small specialist markets. This **post-Fordist** system requires a skilled, adaptable workforce able to use advanced technology.

Post-Fordism therefore calls for a different kind of education system that encourages self-motivation and creativity. It must also provide lifelong retraining, because rapid technological change makes existing skills obsolete.

As a result, postmodernists argue, education has become more diverse and responsive to the needs of different individuals. In their view, the correspondence principle no longer operates. Unlike Marxists, postmodernists argue that education reproduces diversity, not inequality.

- 1 Explain the difference between Fordist and post-Fordist production systems.
- 2 Why do postmodernists argue that post-Fordism needs a different type of education system from that described by the correspondence principle?

Activity Discussion

Which side are you on?

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Topic summary

Functionalists take a **consensus** view. They see education as performing three important functions – **socialisation into the shared culture**, equipping individuals with **specialist work skills** for the division of labour, and **selection for work roles**. Education is organised on **meritocratic** principles.

The **New Right and neoliberals** take a **conservative** view. They believe education can only perform its role effectively if it is organised on **market** principles rather than run by the state.

Marxists take a **class conflict** approach. They see education as serving the **needs of capitalism**. Education is an **ideological state apparatus** that **reproduces** and **legitimises class inequality** through the **correspondence principle** and **myth of meritocracy**. Although pupils may **resist** indoctrination, their counter-school culture may actually prepare them for unskilled labour.

Postmodernists argue that the economy has become **post-Fordist** and education is becoming more **diverse** and **flexible**.

EXAMINING THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN SOCIETY

QuickCheck Questions

Check your answers at www.sociology.uk.net

- 1 Explain the term 'ascribed status'.
- 2 Explain what is meant by 'particularistic standards'.
- 3 Identify two ways in which New Right ideas are similar to those of functionalists.
- 4 Explain the difference between the reproduction of class inequality and the legitimisation of class inequality.
- 5 Explain what Bowles and Gintis mean by the correspondence principle.
- 6 Explain what is meant by 'post-Fordism'.
- 7 How does the critical modernist view of education differ from the Marxist view?
- 8 Suggest two criticisms of Willis' study.

Questions to try

Whether or not you're taking the AS exams during your A level course, trying the AS questions below is a very good way of testing your knowledge and understanding and practising your skills in preparation for your A level exams.

Item A Some sociologists claim that education reproduces and legitimates social class inequality. They argue that it operates in the interests of the ruling class, preparing working-class pupils for working-class jobs and justifying this outcome as fair.

Other sociologists disagree. They claim that education offers all pupils an equal opportunity to succeed.

Item B Functionalist and Marxist sociologists are interested in similar aspects of the role of the education system. For example, both examine the relationship between education and work. Both perspectives also look at how norms and values are transmitted through education. However, while Marxists and functionalists focus on similar issues, they reach very different conclusions about the role of education.

AS level questions

- 1 Define the term 'myth of meritocracy'. (2 marks)
- 2 Outline **three** ways in which the correspondence principle operates within school. (6 marks)
- 3 Outline and explain **two** roles that education fulfils according to functionalists. (10 marks)
- 4 Applying material from **Item A** and your knowledge, evaluate the view that 'education reproduces and legitimates social class inequality'. (20 marks)

A level question

- 5 Applying material from **Item B** and your knowledge, 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)

The Examiner's Advice

Q4 Spend about 30 minutes on this question. Identify the view as a Marxist one and define reproduction and legitimisation.

Explain how each contributes to social class inequality. Do this by creating a chain of reasoning (see page 248). For example, education produces sets of ideas that disguise the real cause of class inequality. Working-class pupils are taught to accept that their subordinate position is the result of a meritocratic system in which they had an equal chance to succeed. This means they are less likely to challenge the capitalist system afterwards in work. Use evidence from studies such as Althusser, Bowles and Gintis, and Willis, and develop the points noted in Item A.

Evaluate the view, making criticisms of each argument as you go along rather than putting them in a separate section at the end. For example, what Marxists see as ruling-class ideology, functionalists see as shared values.

Q5 Spend about 45 minutes on this question. The most effective way to tackle it is to use the 'similar issues' and 'different conclusions' wording in the question to organise your answer. First identify the similar issues Marxists and functionalists focus on. These include the teaching of values, preparation for work, role allocation and unequal educational outcomes. Present a 'Marxist versus functionalist' account of each issue in turn. This will build a strongly evaluative answer. Do this by creating a chain of reasoning. For example, both perspectives see education as important in establishing a person's status. For functionalists, we achieve status through our individual efforts within a meritocracy, whereas for Marxists, our class background determines our status. Use evidence from studies such as Durkheim, Parsons, Davis and Moore, Althusser, Bowles and Gintis and Willis, and develop the points in Item B. Remember also to evaluate the view as a whole at the end, e.g. by considering their similarities (e.g. the education system as a structure) and their differences (e.g. consensus versus conflict views).