

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
- 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. For further discussion of the role of education and training in equipping young people with specialist skills, see link 1.3.

Parsons: meritocracy

The American functionalist Talcott Parsons (1967) 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.

Activity

Explain in your own words what functionalists mean by the following terms:

- social solidarity
- complex division of labour
- universalistic standards
- a set of impersonal rules (in school)
- meritocracy