

Davis and Moore: role allocation

Parsons argues that schools also perform a second function: that 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.

Like Parsons, Kingsley Davis and Wilbert Moore (1945) also see education as a device for selection and role allocation, but they focus on the relationship between education and social inequality.

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.

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.

- 1 Name three functions that functionalists see education as performing.
- 2 In what ways can school be seen as a 'society in miniature'?
- 3 In your own words, explain why a meritocratic education system might enable society to make best use of people's talents.

Box 13 Vocational education and training (VET)

Vocational education involves work-related study, mostly in school or college. In vocational training, learners acquire job-specific knowledge and skills mainly on the job or in work-like situations. From a functionalist perspective, VET teaches individuals the specialist skills they need to perform their role in the division of labour and meet society's economic needs.

However, there has long been concern that the British education system has lost touch with the economy. For example, in 1976 Labour Prime Minister Jim Callaghan initiated a 'Great Debate' on the role of education.