

The functions of education 1

The Functionalist theory of Education

Functionalists see the education system as part of the wider social system. In particular, they see education as playing a major role as major **secondary agent of socialisation**. For example, Durkheim (1903) argued that schools, transmit and reproduce, generation by generation, shared cultural values such as

- **Achievement**
- **Competition**
- **Individualism**
- **Morality**
- **Social solidarity or belonging to a community**
- **Equality of opportunity**

This **social reproduction** which is carried out by both the academic curriculum and the **hidden curriculum**, helps to ensure **value consensus** – societal-wide agreement on the most appropriate values and norms – and consequently, **social order** (which results from the fact that the majority agree to abide by much the same set of rules. Those that do not agree are generally seen by the majority group as deviants.

Social integration and social solidarity

Durkheim believed that education functioned to bring about social integration and social solidarity.

Social integration is the process during which **children are incorporated into the social structure of societies**. Social structure refers to **the way society is organised**, for example, into a **social system made up of inter-related social institutions** such as family, education, religion, criminal justice system etc.

Durkheim believed that society exerted a powerful force on individuals. People's shared norms, beliefs, and values make up a **collective consciousness**, or a **shared way of understanding and behaving in the world**. This collective consciousness **binds individuals together and creates social integration** – most members of live peacefully alongside each other, behaving in similar ways and following much the same set of rules.

Durkheim also believed education functioned to bring about **social solidarity** – a sense of **belonging to a wider community** or society. He argued that academic subjects like history, language and religious education link children to society, past and present, and promote a sense of belonging to an entity bigger than the individual. Children are constantly reminded that they have social obligations – that they are part of a bigger whole which is more important than their individual selves.

For example, in Wales the learning of the Welsh language is compulsory in primary schools in order to remind children of their Welsh heritage.

Defining curriculum

The **academic or formal curriculum** refers to the **knowledge** that is taught in schools, usually with the end goal of passing an examination and gaining specific skills and qualifications.

The **hidden curriculum** refers to the **informal learning processes** that occur in schools. These processes often have the 'side-effect' of transmitting subtle messages to pupils and students about key values, attitudes and norms of behaviour. For example, Jackson (1964) described the hidden curriculum as the '**unpublicised features of school life**' in which students learn to accept the unequal distribution of power within schools and society, and that rules about behaviour underpin most aspects of social life inside and outside school. The hidden curriculum also teaches pupils and students how and when to accept criticism and praise.

School as a social bridge

Talcott Parsons (1961) argued that the main function of education was to act as a **social bridge between the family** (which loves its members regardless of talent and ability) **and wider society** in which people are judged on merit. He saw the classroom as a **microcosm of society** in which children were exposed to a variety of cultures for the very first time. He also claimed that this experience would encourage **tolerance** and consequently bring about integration and solidarity.

Education as meritocracy

Functionalists claim that western educational systems are **meritocratic**, that is, they **practice equality of opportunity** (all children regardless of social background have access to the same knowledge, teaching and qualifications). The concept of 'merit' means that **all children are objectively evaluated and ranked according to the same criteria**, namely talent, skill, ability, effort and achievement, usually through the mechanisms of **examinations** and the award of **qualifications**.

Criticism of the Functionalist theory of social reproduction.

1. It ignores aspects of education which might be dysfunctional or harmful to individuals and societies. For example, some schools practice off-rolling – a practice which involves forbidding less-talented students to take exams in the fear that their potential failure will 'damage' the public image of the school.