

Education study-guide 3

The neo-liberal or New Right perspective on Education

Neo-liberals (often called 'New Right' sociologists) have had a great influence on British education since the 1980s.

Functionalism and neo-liberalism

There is considerable over-lap between functionalism and the New Right perspectives on education. Functionalists and neo-liberals agree that;

- **Education should keep pace with ever-evolving economies and produce workers with the skills required to compete globally with other countries**
- Education systems need to respond to **globalisation**
- Education should **promote social integration, community and national identity**
- The most talented and skilful members of society **deserve higher rewards** than the less-skilled
- Education systems need to be **meritocratic**.

However neo-liberals part company with functionalists on the following points and often use these to criticise functionalism.

- **The state interferes too much in people's lives** and should, instead, **only play a minimal role in society**. State education is often inefficient and a **drain on a country's resources**.
- **Education is best produced by the free market**. Neo-liberals tend to believe that education is a **product or commodity to be marketed, and bought and sold for a profit (rather than a human right freely available to all)**.
- Providers of education such as state schools should be encouraged to **compete with one another like businesses** because **free market competition drives up standards and drives down costs**
- **Consumers of education** such as parents and students need to be **empowered** in that they need more **choices** and a greater say in educational decision-making.
- High government spending on education and other services is regarded as undesirable because it is both **wasteful and often it requires high taxes to pay for it**.

New Right thinking on education in the USA

John Chubb and Terry Moe (1990) are American New Right educationalists who argue that state education in the USA has

- **Generally been unresponsive to the needs of students, parents and the economy.**

- Generally provided a **low standard of education**, especially for disadvantaged groups
- Failed to produce workers with the sort of skills required to compete in a global economy
- Resulted in high levels of **unemployment** as a result of its failure.

In contrast, Chubb and Moe argue that privately-funded education in the USA has to please its customers in order to survive. Consequently, they argue that the standard of US private education is high. They argue that **the free market puts constant pressure on private providers of education to maintain high standards or to improve their product**. If they fail to do this their consumers (parents and local communities) will choose to buy their education elsewhere.

Chubb and Moe recommend that parents should be given **education 'vouchers'** to spend on a school of their choice. Schools consequently would have to compete with each other to attract parental spending. **Schools that had 'failed' in the past would have to improve their product or go out of business**. Chubb and Moe were the first educationalists who argued in favour of empowering parents (or the **parentocracy** as it became known).

New Right influence on British educational policy

The New Right has **exerted great influence over British education**. For example;

- In the 1980s **vocational education** was reformed to help ensure young people were equipped with the 'right' skills and attitudes in order to make them more 'employable' and to reduce youth unemployment.
- The **1988 Education Reform Act (ERA)** introduced the concept of **marketisation** and **parentocracy** into British state education by
 - Changing the **funding formula** so that popular schools received more funding whilst funding was reduced for 'failing' schools.
 - Introducing **league tables** so that schools could compete with each other. The idea was that parents and students could use the data in league tables to make **informed choices** about which school would most benefit their child.
 - The New Labour government of 1997-2010 introduced new types of schools – **academies** – some of which were run wholly or partly by private businesses.
 - The Coalition government of 2010-2015 continued the privatisation of educational services by allowing parents to set up '**free schools**'. For example, in Islington all 70 schools which were once run by Islington's education authority are now run by a private company – Cambridge Educational Services. Failing schools are often taken over by privately-run academy chains.

The national curriculum

New Right sociologists, like functionalists, are keen to ensure the state continues to **supervise the transmission of knowledge** that helps to **establish and maintain a shared British cultural identity**. This was one of the main motivations behind the introduction of the national curriculum by the 1988 ERA.

Educational initiatives promoted by New Right educationalists have also included the promotion of specifically **British values and citizenship**. However, this New Right emphasis has been criticised for neglecting cultural diversity and the fact that the UK is a multicultural society.

Evaluation of the New Right perspective

- (1) Marxists have observed that parental choice merely **reproduces class inequality because middle-class parents use their economic, cultural and social capital to ensure their children get into the best schools**.
- (2) Evidence from both the UK and the USA does not support the view that the privatisation and marketisation of education drives up standards. **Many academies and free schools have been accused of providing poor-quality education**.
- (3) There is evidence that both academies and free schools **discriminate against disadvantaged children**.
- (4) Vocational education in the 1980s was accused of preparing young people for a future of low-skilled low-paid jobs and to **passively accept undemanding jobs for exploitative wages**.
- (5) Marxists argue that **privatised education will always put profit before the wellbeing of students**.