

Sociology Factsheet



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Education and the Economy

This Factsheet explores the relationship between education and the economy and how this relationship has changed and developed over time.

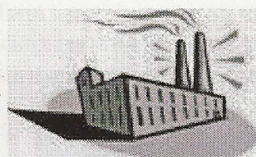
The role of education is closely associated with the needs of the economy, particularly during times of economic change. For example, the recent economic downturn (2008/2009) in Britain has clearly placed education at the top of the political agenda. In April 2009 Gordon Brown promised an extra 35,000 extra training places as a solution to boost the failing economy (Curtis 2009). Importantly, education has effectively been shaped by politics, economics and history, which has informed the structure and nature of the education system as we know it today.

Exam Hint: It is important to show an awareness of how education is linked to other parts of society.

History

1870s.....Forster Education Act

In Britain, the first system of formal schooling developed as a direct response to industrialisation and the need for literate workers at that time. The 1870 Forster Education Act introduced a basic system of primary education with the hope that **literate educated workers** would create a more skilled workforce, giving Britain a competitive edge in the growing industrial economy. As the needs of the economy grew, elementary schooling soon became a compulsory requirement and the school leaving age rose gradually in the pre-war years.



1940s.....Butler Act

In the post war years a **social reformist** approach to the economy was favoured (Hutton 1996). This period reflected strong government intervention to cure 'the ills' of society after the two world wars. In education, The Butler Education Act (1944) endorsed the tripartite system of schooling as the best way to prepare pupils for the world of work. Local education authorities adopted a more unified system of schooling, selecting pupils on the basis of **academic ability** (11+ exam). At 11 years old a more able child was offered a place at a grammar school, whilst those who failed the 11+ were offered a place at a secondary technical or secondary modern school favouring a more vocational curriculum. It was hoped that the **academic/vocational** divide would prepare young people for a range of occupational needs in the economy.

In the 1950's the success of the tripartite system was beginning to be questioned. Some critics argued that it did not provide equal opportunities or 'parity of esteem', which was the guiding principle of the system. One unfortunate downside of selective schooling was that the academic route was viewed as the 'gold standard' option compared to the vocational route, which was perceived as second rate. To a certain extent, this general feeling has remained to this day.

Also, as Halsey (1980) highlighted, the tripartite system failed to address a social class divide in education. For example, two thirds of middle class boys were more likely to go to grammar schools compared to one quarter of working class boys (Halsey et al 1980). Overall, it was felt that the system of selection at 11 years was flawed and that the education system was losing talent that could be beneficial for the economy.

Exam Hint: You could pick up marks for evaluation by referring to the social class divide and the education system

1960s.....Comprehensive Education

By 1960's the political and economic landscape reflected a growing awareness of **egalitarian principles**, which informed social policy at that time. Opinions began to change regarding the effectiveness of the tripartite system. As Giddens (1993) suggests, sociological research began to highlight how the system wasted talent by failing to allow all learners to reach their potential on the basis of social class position. **Comprehensive** schools offered one type of school to cater for all levels of ability. It was hoped that this system of schooling would encourage equality of opportunity, that pupils could reach their potential on the basis of their **ability regardless of social class**, thus providing the economy with a fairer 'fit' of skills and talent.

1970s.....vocational training

During the 1970's, Britain faced a further downturn in the economy, which resulted in high unemployment and fragmented opinion about the role of education in society. This prompted the 'Great Debate' in education with the famous speech by James Callaghan at Ruskin College (1976). This speech was written in response to increasing pressure from the giants of industry to respond to their needs (Jones 1996). The debate instigated the introduction of a broader range of education and vocational training schemes 'to improve relations between industry and education'. It was the general belief that a **skilled workforce** would provide the antidote for a failing British economy at that time.



1980s..... Education Reform Act

During the 1980's the New Right revolution in politics significantly changed contemporary British society. This change came at a time when Britain was in recession, and the industrial structure was changing. Heavy industry and manufacturing were in decline and Britain saw a growth in service sector work.

Under the leadership of Margaret Thatcher (1979) - the marketisation of education was introduced, with the belief that education should operate as a quasi market to reflect the needs of industry. The Education Reform Act 1988 initially promoted the introduction of different types of funding arrangements for schools to become grant maintained and opt out of local authority control.

New city technology colleges were also built to specialise in maths, science and technology to encourage a closer relationship between education and private industry. It was hoped that new funding arrangements would make schools more accountable, as schools reflected the needs of a capitalist economy more closely. These developments also encouraged the rise of the new parentocracy, where parental choice would raise standards making schools accountable in society (Jones 'Education, Hegemony and the New Right' dissertation, Cheltenham 1996).

Since the late 1970's the introduction of further **vocational education and training** initiatives demonstrates how successive governments have attempted to build a stronger relationship between education and the economy. This movement is referred to as the **new vocationalism**, which included a number of schemes such as YTS, TVEI, Training Credits, NVQs and TEC's (Training and Enterprise Councils) aimed at bridging the gap between academic/vocational needs of industry.

Exam Hint: giving examples of how economic and political ideology has determined educational reform since 1988 will gain marks in the exam

1990s.....Labour Party Reform

Since **New Labour** came into power in 1997, the education reform programme has been further intensified which has further endorsed choice and diversity in education. In 1999 New Labour introduced the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust (iNet). The aim of the Trust is to transform secondary education in England through partnership with business and the wider community (www.specialistschools.org.uk), giving schools the opportunity to provide specialist education and training experiences for pupils. Schools can apply to become a specialist college in a variety of subjects including information technology, science or languages for example, with the hope of providing pupils with a broader range of skills to suit the needs of the economy.



As Hyland (2006) suggests, with New Labour we have seen the introduction of Learndirect, the Connexions one-stop shop careers advice and counselling service, Welfare to work Programmes and Learning and Skills councils. In the past five years we have seen the introduction of Modern Apprenticeships, now referred to as Apprenticeships, where young people are offered a balance between studying and work experience (Connexions 2009).

2009.....

From Sept 2009 the introduction of vocational GCSE's and the 14 -19 diploma programmes/qualifications are being phased in alongside the traditional GCSE/A level route. As Hyland (2006) suggests, 'there is a strong emphasis on **bridging the vocational/academic** divide through improved and better vocational programmes'. As young people gain experience of the world of work alongside their studies at school, it is hoped that these schemes will raise standards and produce the skilled workers needed by the economy.

Exam Hint: Government policy changes all the time. You can access information from www.direct.gov.uk about current training initiatives to use as examples in your exam. Information about policy can quickly go out of date in textbooks!

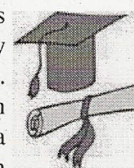
Sociological Perspectives

The relationship between education and the economy has been of primary interest to structural sociologists. Structural sociologists ultimately consider the relationship between people and the social structure (institutions) in society. They are interested in identifying core norms and values (culture) in society and how these values determine the nature of social relationships. Structuralists argue that education plays a key role in socialising young people, preparing them for their future role in society.

Structural sociologists have different opinions about how this happens. Broadly speaking, the relationship between education and the economy is considered as a positive one, fostering **consensus** and stability or as a more divisive means of reinforcing **conflict** in society.

Consensus (Functionalism)

- **Durkheim** (1857-1917) described education as 'social cement' and the key socialising agency needed to maintain **social solidarity** in society. He suggested that the relationship between education and the economy was based upon a shared cultural, social and personality system which effectively allocates pupils their role in society.
- **Parsons** (1952) argued that education acts as a **meritocracy**, where talent and skill is rewarded accordingly in the form of qualifications. Through **achieved status** young people are assigned their roles in the economy according to effort and talent.
- **Davis and Moore** (1967) suggested that education selected the most talented people for the most important jobs. However, some critics argue that this theory is not relevant in contemporary British society. For example, the birth of 'celebrity culture' has provided fame and fortune without formal training or qualifications e.g. Big Brother contestants!



Exam Hint: To pick up AO2 marks in the exam you need to evaluate your points. This involves weighing up the pros and cons of what you are saying in a reflective way. You could argue that the idea of meritocracy is a problematic concept. For example, you could make reference to successful entrepreneurs such as Sir Richard Branson or Sir Alan Sugar who have minimal formal qualifications or training, only to become highly successful businessmen and multi-millionaires!

Conflict (Marxism)

Marxists say that the relationship is essentially based upon a conflict of interests. Marx viewed education as a mode of production, viewing school like a factory that produces knowledge which pupils exchange for their labour e.g. exam grades = occupations.

Importantly, Marxists emphasised how the relationship between education and the economy is presented as fair and natural when really it serves to justify **inequality** and unequal power relationships.

- **Bowles and Gintis** (1976) suggested that the relationship between education and the economy is based on the '**correspondence principle**', where education corresponds to needs of capitalism. It does this through the **hidden curriculum**, which describes the things we learn from the experience of school, not just about acquiring knowledge about a subject. For example, acceptance of hierarchy (power relationships) in preparation for work. Bowles and Gintis emphasise that the relationship between education and the economy legitimises **class based inequality** which is the basic contradiction needed for capitalism to thrive.

- **Willis (1977)** in 'Learning to Labour' took a neo-Marxist approach to analyse the relationship between education and the economy. He analysed how **cultural reproduction** contributed to 'working class kids getting working class jobs'. He studied a gang of boys, primarily from working class backgrounds and found that their experience of schooling led them to accept that 'education was not for them'. By accepting their inferiority in the pecking order they developed a subculture of resistance, which gave them status in a different way. The lads got good at breaking the rules thus contributing to their low academic achievement, preparing them for lower level jobs in the workplace.
- Contemporary sociologists have used the concept of cultural reproduction to explain why boys are now underachieving in education. Francis (2001) studied 'laddish' subcultures and found that working class boys had a negative view of achievement in schools. They rejected schoolwork to avoid being called a 'swot' or 'gay' or 'sissie', in favour of looking hard before teachers and peer group. Consequently, they learnt to lose in education, which prepared them for lower level unskilled jobs in the economy.

Exam Hint: AO1 marks are given for knowledge and understanding of theories including the use of key concepts

Feminism

Feminist research has focussed on gender inequality and how **patriarchy** has dominated the relationship between education and the economy (Spender 1982, Stanworth 1983).



A change in the socio-economic landscape has changed the life chances of girls. This transformation can be seen in education. Where girls were once excluded from schooling they have now overtaken boys in educational achievement. Saying that, women are still under-represented in certain types of jobs and in managerial positions. As Hamilton (2003) suggests, informal mechanisms are still reinforcing gender inequality, allocating 'appropriate' aspirations according to gender. Vocational courses like 'health and social care' for example are seen as much more gender specific, reinforcing the idea that care work is 'women's work'.

Exam Hint: To pick up AO2 marks in the exam you need to apply and interpret the theory using real life examples. You could point out that official statistics highlight that whilst more women are going out to work, they are over-represented in low status, part time positions such as caring, cleaning, clerical work. In comparison, 83% of directors or chief executives are male! (Equal Opportunities Commission 2006)

Test Yourself

1. How did the economy shape the birth of formal schooling in Britain?
2. How has government policy shaped the curriculum to meet the needs of industry?
3. Describe one New Right policy and one Labour policy which have promoted closer links between education and the economy.
4. What is a 'meritocracy'. Which theorists used this concept?
5. Explain the 'correspondence principle' used by Bowles and Gintis.
6. Outline how feminists analyse the relationship between education and the economy.

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Summary

Perspective	Relationship based on:
Historical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • economy • politics • culture
New Right	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • marketisation • parentocracy • choice and control • new vocationalism
New Labour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • specialist schools • vocational educational and training • apprenticeships • 14-19 diploma
Functionalist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consensus • meritocracy • achieved status
Marxist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • conflict • class inequality • correspondence principle • hidden curriculum • subculture
Feminist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • conflict • patriarchy • gender inequality • cultural reproduction

Exam Technique

You may get a similar question to this in the exam:

Outline and assess the role of schools in preparing young people for employment.

To answer this question you could mention the following:

- political economy of schooling, using historical evidence to highlight how education has developed according to political and economic change
- provision of different types of school (marketisation), specialist colleges (eg. Labour Reform) to cater for diversity in the economy
- new vocationalism as an attempt to bridge the gap between education and the economy, including the latest developments regarding apprenticeships and 14-19 diploma
- sociological significance of structural theories such as Functionalism, Marxism and Feminism in the debate
- key theorists eg. Parsons, Davis and Moore, Bowles and Gintis, Willis, Spender, Stanworth
- key concepts such as meritocracy, achieved status, correspondence principle, hidden curriculum, class inequality, gender inequality, patriarchy
- refer to contemporary educational research such as Francis, Hamilton, etc and quote official statistics to support your arguments

Examiners comments on this answer

To answer this question effectively, candidates needed a sound knowledge and understanding of theories which were relevant to the question, particularly Marxism and Functionalism. The majority of candidates were able to write accurately about Davis and Moore, Parsons, Bowles and Gintis, Willis, in particular. Evaluation was often implicit or by juxtaposition, however, with a section of the response on Marxism followed by a section on Functionalism with no explicit link between the two. Some weaker responses wrote about inequalities within education with no analysis of how this relates to employment. Few candidates addressed the notion of new vocationalism in any depth.