The Purpose of Education Viewed From a Sociological Perspective

This essay will focus on Education from a Macro Sociological Perspective - Structural Functionalism. Sociologists perspectives are viewed as either ‘Macro’ or ‘Micro’ (Barkan 2012). According to Barkan (2012) “macro sociologists focus on the big picture, which usually means such things as social structure, social institutions, and social change”. Within the macro perspective there are two main sub-types which dominate; the “Conflict Theory” and “Structural Functionalism” (Brinkeroff et al 2008 p:20). By focusing on the Structural Functionalist Perspective this essay will investigate the perspectives and purposes of education from this point of view.

Structural functionalism “addresses the question of how social organisation is maintained” (Brinkerhoff et al 2008 p:20). According to Brinkerhoff et al (2008 p:20) “this theoretical perspective has its roots in natural science and in the analogy between society and an organism”. Herbert Spencer created an “organismic analogy” in which society is comparable to the human body (Stolley 2005 p:23). This is because the human body is made up of different “systems” which are “made up of interdependent parts” and “subsystems” which interrelate to form one single functioning component (Allan 2014 p:22). According to Allan (2014 p:22) these systems are “mutually dependent” on each other, he links this with society, stating that “society forms its own systems and structures that have specific needs, just like the human body”. In the study of society, a sociologist who follows this perspective will try to identify the structures of society and how they function. The organismic analogy was created to form a better understanding of the structural functionalist perspective about “society as a whole” (Allan 2014 p:22). Emile Durkheim took the analogy to further form the structural functionalist perspective (Stolley 2005 p:23). Curtis and Pettigrew (2009 p:88) state Durkheim believed that “society was best understood as an organised system made up of interlocking and interdependent parts”.

The key focus from a Structural Functionalists perspective is primarily on the “roles of institutions and systems in maintaining and developing ‘cohesion’, ‘social order’ and ‘social solidarity’”(Gewirtz and Cribb 2009). All sociologists are interested in the way societies work, however structural functionalist sociologists are unique by their focus of three major assumptions according to Brinkerhoff et al (2008 p:22); these
being “Stability”, “Harmony” and “Evolution” within society. A key theme within Structural Functionalism is that social institutions only purpose to benefit society. Ballantine and Spade (2008 p:9) suggest that, in this perspective, “education, as an institution in society, operates to facilitate the smooth functioning of society along with other social institutions”. This perspective “sees the world in terms of consensus and stability” (Brinkerhoff et al 2008 p22).

Structural Functionalists believe there are four main purposes for education; “social control and maintaining social order”; “socialisation”; “role allocation/preparing for work” and “development of basic academic skills” (Bartlett and Burton 2007 p:14). They focus on these four purposes, as they believe they are what contribute to social solidarity to maintain a “stable society” (Bartlett and Burton 2007 p:14). As Structural Functionalists are “consensus theorists”, regarding education; they focus “on the way schools create social cohesion and how they can make effective use of human resources for the good of society” (Swale 2012 p:2). Haralambos and Holborn (2008 p:600) express the structural functionalist view of education focuses on the “positive contributions” in which the education system makes “to the maintenance of the social system”.

Emile Durkheim, a key figure in Structural Functionalism, believes a key purpose of education is the “Socialisation of Children” into the norms and values of society (Durkheim in Giddens, 2006 p:686). According to Durkheim (in Allan 2014 p:125) education is a “primary source for socialisation of the young and the reorganisation of society”. This value consensus is considered important to Structural Functionalists as it “helps to shape beliefs and moral values” within children eventually creating a more conformed society (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008 p:599). Both Durkheim and Parsons (in Haralambos and Holborn, 2008 p:601) agreed that “the school represents society in miniature” socialising children to ‘fit’ into society.

Another purpose of educational institutions from the perspective of Structural Functionalist is “Role Allocation” (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008 p:22). Davis and Moore, key Structural Functionalists, argue that effective role allocation in society is important as “all roles must be filled by those best able to perform them” (in Haralambos and Holborn, 2008 p:22). Structural Functionalists believe there is a
need to “prepare children for work and to assign roles into society” (Bartlett and Burton 2007 p:14). This “tends to stress the activity of schools in training and selecting children so that they fit into some necessary slot in a relatively harmonious society” (Meighan and Harber 2007 p:16). This perspective suggests that children need to be “manipulated” to benefit society and that the schools purpose is to educate children in order to fit in (Meighan and Harber 2007 p:16). According to Swale (2012 p:2) Davis and Moore believe the education system sorts students for the workplace by “allocating them to different courses according to their different abilities”. Davis and Moore (in Haralambos and Holborn, 2008 p:602) see the education system as a “mechanism” of “social stratification” where you can select talented individuals to allocate them into the important job roles.

It is suggested that role allocation has developed due to living in a ‘meritocratic society’- where the “education system and schools operate on meritocratic principles: status is achieved on the basis of merit (or worth)” (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008 p:601) . Talcott Parsons also sees education as part of a meritocracy, suggesting education provides a “secondary agent of socialisation – a bridge between family and society” (Parsons in Bryant 2014). Parsons believes that education promotes values “competition”, “equality” and “individualism” (Parsons in Bryant 2014). However, some may argue against role allocation and selection; Meighan and Harber (2007 p:16) explain that children are “being processed” within the education system today and “have no rights”.

Another purpose in which Structural Functionalists believe education holds, is “Maintaining social control and social order” (Bartlett and Burton 2007 p:15), this is mainly in the form of rules, values and discipline. Structural functionalists believe in order to live there needs to be “a level of order and safety” which involves “the rule of law” that is seen in society as the “norms of behavior or manners” (Bartlett and Burton 2007 p:15). Durkheim states “Education is training for the children in the school” (Durkheim 1956 p:67), suggesting the education system is an institution designed primarily for teaching children rules and regulations to benefit wider society. Structural functionalists like Parsons, describe education as “a useful bridge between the home and work” (Swale 2012 p:2). This is seen as an important factor, as in the family the child is often treated “tolerantly” with “freedom”, whereas in the
workplace workers are judged on a “universalistic basis and have to conform to specific rules” (Swale 2012 p:2). “Schools socialise children into the norms and values of society” according to Swale (2012 p:2), educating them into what the right behavior is and the wrong behavior is in order to achieve social solidarity.

Durkheim believes the achievement of “social solidarity is ensured by culture: collective standards or rules of behavior” (Durkheim in Jones 1993 p:25). He also believes “it is by respecting the school rules that the child learns to respect rules in general, that he develops the habit of self control and restraint simply because he should control and retrain himself.” (Durkheim 2003 in Curtis & Pettigrew 2009 p:88). Structural Functionalists believe it is important that schools introduce and impart rules and regulations to children in preparation for the future, ultimately for the control and order of society. In Durkheim’ findings he thinks an important factor in the order of society is teaching History (Giddens 2006 p:686). He states by learning history “children gain an understanding of the common values in society, uniting a multitude of separate individuals”, resulting in the learning of both “religious” and “moral beliefs” towards ‘social solidarity’ (Durkheim in Giddens, 2006 p:686). This is important as the education system allows children to “internalize the social rules that contribute to the functioning of society” (Durkheim in Giddens, 2006 p:686).

Structural functionalists also believe another important purpose of education is the “Development of basic academic skills” (Bartlett and Burton 2007 p:14). Durkheim argued that “education teaches individuals specific skills necessary for their future occupation” and with the increasingly industrialized society it is becoming more important to learn specific skills due to the “complex and specialized division of labour” (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008 p:22).

Although structural functionalists believe their perspective is for the good of society, others disagree. Meighan and Harber (2007 p:16) compare teachers to “potter moulding clay”, suggesting children are not seen as individuals rather being formed into a “processed” being. Meighan and Harber (2007 p:17) argue the functionalist approach as being based on “persuasion”, “coaxing” and “forms of control”. Some sociologists state children are being over-socialised which has drawn many criticisms. Marxists, such as Althusser, argue that schools “transmit a dominant culture which
serves the needs of the ruling class rather than those of society as a whole” (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008 p:601). This can be seen as negative and outdated as in the postmodern world we live in today countries are becoming increasingly “multicultural” creating a debate among sociologists whether there should be a “single culture in which schools base their curriculum”. (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008 p:601).

After analysing Structural Functionalism it’s clear that from this perspective the education systems purpose is to benefit society. Structural Functionalists feel the main purposes that education holds are; “social control and maintaining social order”; “the socialisation of children”; “role allocation and preparing children for work” and “the development of basic academic skills” (Bartlett and Burton 2007 p:14). Overall they feel education is key for the “smooth functioning of society” (Ballantine and Spade 2008 p:9) to maintain ‘cohesion’, ‘social order’ and ‘social solidarity’”(Gewirtz and Cribb 2009).

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References

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