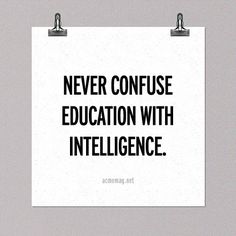
**THE PURPOSE(S) OF EDUCATION**

**(i) THE FUNCTIONALIST APPROACH**

**Functionalism** is a school of thought that analyzes how the parts of a society should work to achieve stability and well-being for all. Functionalists see education as a social institution that performs functions for the benefit of society. Schools do this by fulfilling four main functions: teaching knowledge and skills, facilitating the cultural transmission of values, facilitating social integration, and replacing functions that are no longer being provided by the family. These are all categorized as **manifest functions**, meaning they are intentional and conscious consequences of education.

**Knowledge, Skills, and Cultural Values**

The most obvious manifest (intentional) function is the first one - teaching knowledge and skills. In contemporary society, knowledge and skills consist of reading, writing, arithmetic, and computer skills.

The second manifest function of education is the transmission of cultural values. This is a process in which schools pass on a society's core values from one generation to the next. One way that this is done is by controlling the language of instruction. As sociologists James Henslin and Adie Nelson note, "It has long been recognized that the language of instruction is closely tied to cultural preservation" (Henslin & Nelson, 1996, p. 480). That is why the government of Quebec has fought so hard for French to be the exclusive language of instruction in the province.

The term ***latent function*** means unintended and unconscious consequences of education. Functionalists argue that one of education's latent functions is to further the dominance of Western culture. These sociologists argue that the Canadian education system promotes Western values of individualism, competition, and patriotism. Individualism is promoted by focusing on individual assignments rather than group work. Report cards print your individual mark as well as the class median, indicating whether you have performed "above" or "below" others. The absence of a dress code or uniform also allows each student to identify her- or himself as unique, rather than as part of a larger, similar community.

The value of competition is stressed both in the classroom and in the schoolyard. Teachers routinely divide the classes into teams to compete for "first place" in spelling bees or review games. As well, the school's formal sports program focuses on competitive games such as baseball, football, basketball, hockey, and volleyball. Although these sports involve teamwork, individuals who excel are routinely singled out for special privileges. They may be designated team captains or awarded "most valuable player" status.

Many Canadians tend not to think of themselves as belonging to a very patriotic nation. Witnessing the high levels of patriotism in the United States, they consider Canadians pale in comparison. Nevertheless, patriotism is another value promoted in Canadian schools and students are taught that Canada is the best country in the world in which to live. This is often done by highlighting problems that exist elsewhere (for example, high levels of obesity and/or gun violence in the United States). Other features of the country that are lauded are its historic political and social leaders, its enlightened social institutions, and its respect for multiculturalism.

**Social Integration**

Functionalists believe that another purpose of education is social integration - that is, helping to socialize students into mainstream culture. When children first come to school, they bring with them the speech patterns, ways of dressing, behaviours, and attitudes of their family and social class. Exposure to peers and the school promotion of Canadian culture integrate or mould this diverse collection of students into a more or less cohesive unit. According to functionalists, if people believe that their society's social institutions are the basis of their welfare, they will have little reason to rebel. In fact, they will help to maintain the system as it is.

**Reducing Family Functions**

The fourth purpose of education, according to functionalists, is replacing some of the functions formerly provided by the family. For example, now that most families have two wage earners, child care has become a manifest function of schools. Schools now provide sex education, a responsibility that used to rest solely on parents. In some cases, the roles of confidant and advisor, one fulfilled by family members, have been taken over by guidance counsellors and teachers.

**Functionalism - Recap:**

1. Explain, with the use of a ‘human body’ – functionalism as a way to understand society.

2. Explain, with examples, the difference between latent and manifest functions of education.

3. What are some of the cultural values that are transmitted in school... and how are they transmitted? Give an example from Acton High.

4. In what ways are students socially integrated by schools?

5. Make a list of all the ways that your school performs family functions. Do you think any of the points on your list would be better handled by the family? Explain.

**(ii) THE CONFLICT PERSPECTIVE**

In contrast to functionalists, **conflict theorists** view society as composed of groups fiercely competing for scarce resources. Conflict theories see the educational system as a tool used by those in power to control society and maintain dominance. To these sociologists, the real purpose of education is to teach a **hidden curriculum** of unwritten goals (for example, promoting obedience to authority and conformity to cultural norms). The purpose of this hidden curriculum is to teach students the work habits and values needed to work for the elite. In this way, school ultimately perpetuates social inequalities. One conflict theorist who has researched these ideas and claims and found evidence for them is Harry Gracey.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| http://t1.ftcdn.net/jpg/00/73/08/68/240_F_73086899_CeKnToB2y8sPx003DiPw8XX8a5tM0Gi2.jpg | **Kindergarten as Boot Camp**  After a 1991 participant-observation study, Harry Gracey concluded that kindergarten is a "boot camp". He argues that impressionable young children are drilled with the behaviours and attitudes deemed necessary for their student role. Among the required behaviours and attitudes are: talking only when asked to speak, requesting permission to speak, and obeying authority figures. Gracey observed kindergarten teachers quietly scolding non-conforming students while giving approval for conforming behaviours. The goal of kindergarten, in Gracey's view, is to mould individuals from any diverse backgrounds into a compliant group. The members of this group will, on command, unthinkingly follow classroom routines. |

**Maintaining Class Structure**

For conflict theorists, the bottom line is that education reproduces the social-class structure. Forces behind the curriculum (the stuff you learn) and classroom procedures promote the interests of society's elite and perpetuate social-class divisions. Regardless of abilities, children from wealthy families are more likely to be placed on university-bound streams. Children from poor families, on the other hand, are overly represented in vocational (hands on) programs. Support for these arguments was supplied as far back as 1982, in the book *Stations and Callings*, by John Porter, Marian Porter, and Bernard Blishen. The authors found that students from a higher social class were four times more likely to pursue academic streams of education than were those from a lower social class. And because people with higher educations in turn earn more money, patterns of inequality tend to reproduce themselves.

1. What do conflict theorists mean by a "hidden curriculum"? Does one exist in your school? Explain with examples.

2. How might schools perpetuate social-class divisions? What purpose would this serve in society?

**At Issue: Ontario’s New Sex Education Curriculum**

1. What changes have been made to Ontario’s new sex ed. curriculum (what is taught)?

2. Why do some parents find these changes to be too challenging, so much so that they have organized protests, petitions, some even removing their students from school? (your response should consider particular social groups that find the material offensive)

3. Use functionalism as a theory to view the topic. How would a functionalist explain what is going on? Can an argument also be made from a conflict perspective?

