

4. Education

INTRODUCTION

Whatever your personal view of school (the happiest days of your life or, in my case, a miserable battle against boredom, petty rivalries and having to get up way too early on cold winter days), there is little doubt education, as a social institution, has an important role to play in our society. Whether you view that role positively or negatively, we need to examine a range of perspectives (structuralist, interactionist, postmodern and New Right) that offer 'different explanations of the role of the education system'.

WARM UP: WHAT'S THE POINT OF EDUCATION?

Most of us spend at least 11 years in some sort of educational institution, so we should know something about what happens in schools. To get you thinking about the role of education therefore, identify as many things as you can relating to two types of learning:

- formal learning (the things schools are supposed to teach us) and
- informal learning (the things we learn that are not always openly taught).

I have identified one of each to get you started.

Formal Learning	Informal Learning
Curriculum subjects (English, Maths, etc.)	How to deal with people who are 'not family'

Structuralist perspectives



Preparing the ground

In this section we are going to examine three main structuralist perspectives on the role of education – functionalism, Marxism and feminism – and we can begin by identifying the major ideas that characterise each perspective.

Functionalism

Although this perspective has generally declined in sociological importance in the UK over the past 20 or so years, its influence in shaping educational policy shouldn't be underestimated. This is partly because the basic ideas that sit at the heart of this perspective – ideas about *consensus*, *competition* and *achievement through merit*, for example – sit relatively comfortably with modern Conservative, Liberal and Labour