

PARSONS - EDUCATION, SOCIALISATION AND IDENTITY



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Talcott Parsons, a prominent Functionalist sociologist, argued that education plays a central role in modern industrial societies. As an agent of secondary socialisation, education bridges the gap between the family and the wider society, preparing individuals for their future roles. Parsons viewed education as a vital institution for maintaining social order and stability through the transmission of shared norms, values, and identities.

Secondary Socialisation and Identity Formation

Parsons emphasized the distinction between primary and secondary socialisation. Primary socialisation occurs within the family, where children learn particularistic values—those specific to their family context. However, modern industrial societies require individuals to adopt universalistic values, which apply to everyone regardless of their background. Education performs this function by teaching norms such as discipline, punctuality, and cooperation.

Schools act as a microcosm of society, introducing students to societal expectations and preparing them for participation in broader social structures. For instance, the value of achievement is instilled through competition and rewards, while the principle of equality of opportunity emphasizes fairness in accessing opportunities. These values are essential for sustaining a meritocratic system.

Parsons also believed that education shapes individual identities. Through secondary socialisation, students transition from family-specific roles to societal roles, internalizing norms and values that define their place in society. For example, children learn to see themselves as contributors to the collective good, fostering a sense of purpose and belonging. This process is key to forming identities aligned with societal expectations, such as hard work and ambition.

Meritocracy and Role Allocation

Parsons believed that education operates as a meritocracy, where individuals are rewarded based on effort and ability rather than inherited status. Schools assess and evaluate students through standardized testing and examinations, sorting them into roles that match their talents and skills. This process, called role allocation, ensures that the most capable individuals occupy positions of importance, such as doctors, engineers, and leaders.

Parsons argued that this meritocratic function benefits both individuals and society. For individuals, education offers opportunities to achieve their potential, while society benefits from having skilled and competent members in key roles. By rewarding effort and ability, education legitimizes social stratification, making it appear fair and just.

Social Integration

Another important function of education, according to Parsons, is fostering social integration. Schools help create a sense of belonging and shared identity by promoting value consensus—agreement on common goals and values. For example, subjects like history and citizenship teach students about their cultural heritage and responsibilities as members of society. This helps to unify diverse groups within a society, reducing conflict and promoting cohesion.

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Criticisms of Parsons' Views

While Parsons' ideas have been influential, they have also faced significant criticism.

1. Marxist Critique: Marxist sociologists argue that education reinforces existing class inequalities instead of promoting meritocracy. Wealthier students often have access to better resources and opportunities, giving them an advantage over their working-class peers. Education serves the interests of the ruling class by legitimizing inequality.
2. Feminist Critique: Feminists highlight how education perpetuates traditional gender roles. For instance, certain subjects and career paths are still associated with specific genders, limiting opportunities for women.
3. Contemporary Critique: Critics question whether modern education truly operates as a meritocracy. Structural barriers, such as racism and cultural bias, continue to disadvantage marginalized groups. Additionally, the focus on standardized testing may overlook important aspects of individual potential.

Conclusion

Talcott Parsons' functionalist perspective provides a framework for understanding the role of education in modern societies. His emphasis on secondary socialisation, meritocracy, and role allocation highlights the importance of education in promoting social order, stability, and identity formation. However, his views are not without limitations, as critics argue that education often reproduces inequality rather than eliminating it. For sociology students, understanding Parsons' ideas offers a foundation for exploring debates about the purpose and fairness of education in contemporary society.

What is secondary socialisation, and how does it differ from primary socialisation?

How does education shape individual identity, according to Parsons?

Explain Parsons' concept of meritocracy in education.

What does Parsons mean by role allocation?

Identify and explain one criticism of Parsons' view on education.

How does education contribute to social integration, according to Parsons?