

# Education



**How convincing is the view that education systems reproduce social divisions rather than equalizing educational outcomes?**

*This question asks you to examine sociological theories of education, especially those that see education systems as contributing to the reproduction of social divisions. The bulk of your time will be spent outlining these theories and the evidence they use to assess just how 'convincing' they are. You will also need to include any counter evidence.*

Your first task is to explain what education systems are (pp. 833-4). Note that whilst education is a social institution, schooling is the delivery of a specific curriculum in state- operated education systems. Durkheim (and later, Parsons) saw schools as socializing agents, ensuring that crucial societal values are transmitted over generations (pp. 834-5). Education systems also teach skills necessary for life in complex industrial societies.

Critics of functionalism see the 'hidden curriculum' as more significant than the formal one. Marxist theorists, Bowles and Gintis (pp. 836-7), see the very structure of schooling corresponding to the structure of working life as a preparation for the capitalist society young people will move into. Illich's ideas are similar, though he also advocates the deschooling of society. Here the notion of education as a 'great leveller' is rejected.

Next, you can consider theories of cultural reproduction, which directly address the issue of social divisions. The chapter covers several of these (from page 839) in relation to the major social divisions of class, gender and ethnicity. Social class is discussed in Bernstein's study of inequalities in British education. The dominance of an elaborated language code in schools systematically disadvantages working-class children who learn a restricted code in family settings (pp. 840-1). Willis also explored class in his study of school sub-cultures (pp. 839-44), many of which seem rebellious, but work to produce the educational under-achievers that capitalism needs to fill the more undemanding jobs in the labour market.

The reproduction of gender divisions can discuss McRobbie's and Lees's work on femininity (p. 845). Schools, they argued, reinforce traditional gender stereotypes, whilst teachers focus on boys, assuming that girls will become homemakers. Dale Spender saw that school textbooks were imbued with an implicit sexism in their use of language and male-dominated imagery, particularly in science texts. However, things are much changed today. In the developed societies, girls now out-perform boys in most subjects and at all levels, and you could use some of the evidence in the section on pages 853-60 to challenge the more pessimistic view that education systems inevitably reproduce gender divisions.

The chapter provides evidence on education and ethnicity (p. 860 on), via school exclusion rates, higher education participation and achievement rates. Given the diversity of minority ethnic group experience and educational outcomes you will have to carefully sift this evidence to explain why some minority groups do better than other. One factor to be considered is the persistence of racism in society, which is also evident in schools. Wright's study of schooling and ethnicity discovered stereotypical assumptions amongst staff about the 'disruptiveness' of African Caribbean boys which led to differential treatment and an increased likelihood of reprimand and exclusion (pp. 862-3). Remember that the question asks for your overall assessment of the view that education systems reproduce social divisions and you should return to this by way of a conclusion.