## The AQA specification: **Education**

- The relationship the role and functions of the education system, including its relationship to the economy and to class structure.

**The exam requires that you are able to:**

▶ Describe and evaluate the functionalist perspective on education.

## Keywords

- **Social solidarity** refers to the bonding/integration of people together into society through shared values, and a common culture and understanding.

- **Meritocratic** means that status or position in society is achieved through your own abilities and efforts rather than because of your class, ethnicity or gender, or the family you were born into or who you know.

## Functionalist perspective on education

- Functionalists argue that for society to function effectively, there must be social order and stability (ie, an absence of disorder, conflict and tension), otherwise society will collapse. In order for society to survive, society needs **social solidarity** – everyone sharing the same norms and values (**value consensus**).

- Functionalism is seen as a **structural theory** because it claims that social structures (ie, social institutions) such as religion, family and school perform a number of positive 'functions/roles', both for society as a whole and for individuals, in order to help maintain social solidarity.  Therefore, functionalists are mainly interested in the positive functions performed by education. There are two key functions::

  — *The socialisation function.*  The school system helps socialise students into society by teaching individuals about the accepted behaviour and rules of society, which helps achieve social solidarity.

  — *The economic function.*  The school system plays a key role in slotting people into 'appropriate' future occupational positions in society.

## Durkheim: social solidarity

- **Education promotes social solidarity.**  Durkheim (1903) claims that the education system teaches students the shared values and norms of society which create social solidarity. The school, with its rules, rituals and regulations, teaches students the importance of social constraints and cooperation; in some respects, school is 'society in miniature', creating tolerant and law-abiding future citizens who will cooperate with each other.

# Parsons: universalistic values and meritocracy

- **Education teaches universalistic values.** Parsons (1961) argues that school helps prepare us for society by moving us from particularistic to universalistic values. Particularistic values are taught during primary socialisation within the family, in which parents treat their children as if they are special regardless of their achievement. Society cannot act in this way but must function on universalistic values: everyone has to be treated equally. Students must learn that success and achievement (or status with respect to the law) does not depend on where you come from or who you know, but on individual merit (see below). Learning these universalistic standards enables students to more easily make the transition from particularistic values (family) to universalistic values (society) which are essential for cooperation.

- **Meritocracy.** Parsons also sees the education system as playing the role of socialising individuals into accepting the shared values of a meritocratic society. Firstly, this means that everyone achieves their place in society through their own efforts and abilities, rather than through any inherited status. Secondly, every individual is given an equal opportunity to achieve their full potential without being discriminated against on grounds of social class, ethnicity or gender. Therefore, the education system teaches pupils to understand the values of achievement and of equal opportunity. Parsons sees the school as a miniature version of 'society', as both are meritocratic. In school, individuals succeed or fail depending on their own ability and effort. This prepares them for life in modern society and its economy, which is competitive and individualistic.

# Davis and More: role allocation

- **Role allocation.** Davis and Moore (1945) see the education system's main function as one of selection and the allocation to students of their future work roles. It does this by carrying out a filtering process of 'sifting and sorting out' individuals so that the most talented get the best qualifications and are allocated to the most important jobs. Individuals have different abilities and skills. Davis and Moore see some work roles as more complex than others and requiring greater skill. For society to function efficiently, the most talented individuals need to be allocated to the most important jobs. Higher rewards are offered for these jobs to motivate everyone to strive for them. A meritocratic education system allows everyone to compete equally. As a result, society is more productive because the most able people do the most important jobs.

# Human capital theory

- **Human capital theory** was developed by Schultz (1971) and suggests that high levels of spending on education and training (hence 'human capital') are required as these develop people's knowledge and skills which in turn helps produce an efficient and successful economy. Functionalists argue that greater investment in human capital has led to the expansion of higher education courses to meet the demands of modern technological advanced society. The meritocratic education system is more important than ever as it is the best way to make sure the best-qualified and most highly-skilled people get the best jobs. This ensures greater economic productivity for society and a higher financial return for the skilled individual.

## ✔✗ Evaluation

✗ **Meritocracy is a myth.** Marxists argue that the meritocratic education system is a myth. This is because, in reality, some social groups such as the working class and ethnic or gender groups are often discriminated against or under-achieve for reasons outside school influence (eg, material deprivation). This would suggest that the education system is not totally based on equal opportunity for everyone, as suggested by the functionalists, as the success of some students can be influenced by factors such as class, ethnicity and gender.

Marxists would also argue that the education system works in favour of the ruling class because it transmits the values and ideological views of that class rather than society's shared values, as claimed by the functionalists.

✗ **Social class, gender and ethnicity are influential.** Evidence has shown that most people in middle-class occupations have middle-class backgrounds, and that working-class jobs are often filled by people from working-class backgrounds. Equally, females and certain ethnic/colour groups (eg, Bangladeshi or Black) are less likely to be in well-paid jobs. This would suggest a person's class background, ethnicity and gender are more important in determining their income later in life than is their achievement in school.

✗ **Education is not linked to job skill.** It is difficult to see a direct link between the subjects studied at school and what is required of workers in their jobs. It could be argued that beyond basic standards of literacy and numeracy, and university courses in a few subjects, such as law or medicine, most formal education is not closely related to the skills required for an efficient workforce. This would suggest that education does not necessarily equip people for future work roles.

✗ **Most functional jobs are questionable.** Davis and Moore assume that the most important functional jobs are given to those best qualified for them, and that they are rewarded financially for them. However, in real life this is not the case. For example, footballers (eg, David Beckham) are exceptionally well-paid; does this mean that being a footballer is functionally more important for society than being a doctor, teacher or nurse, because they are paid less?

## Practice exam questions

### AS level exam questions

1. Define the term 'meritocracy'. **[2 marks]**

2. Define the term 'value consensus'. **[2 marks]**

3. Define the term 'social solidarity'. **[2 marks]**

4. Define the term 'universalistic norms'. **[2 marks]**

**5.** Outline **three** functions that the education system might perform according to the functionalist view. **[6 marks]**

**6.** Outline **three** ways in which school prepares pupils for work. **[6 marks]**

**7.** Outline and explain **two** criticisms that may be made of the functionalist view of the role of the education system. **[10 marks]**

**8.** Using material from **Item (...)** and your knowledge, evaluate the functionalist contribution to our understanding of the role of the education system in society. **[20 marks]**

## A level exam questions

**1.** Outline and explain **two** roles that education fulfils according to functionalists. **[4 marks]**

**2.** Outline **two** ways in which schools are 'based on meritocratic principles'. **[4 marks]**

**3.** Outline **three** criticisms that sociologists may make of the functionalist view of the education system. **[6 marks]**

**4.** Outline **three** ways in which school prepares pupils for work. **[6 marks]**

**5.** Applying material from **Item (...),** analyse **two** ways in which education is 'based on meritocratic principles'. **[10 marks]**

**The exam requires that you are able to:**
▶ Understand the different types of documents sociologists use in sociological research.
▶ Evaluate the strengths and limitations of documents.
▶ Evaluate the strengths and limitations of using documents when investigating educational issues.

## Documents

Sociologists often use document resources in their research investigations. Documents are written, pictorial or audio material produced by government bodies, organisations and individuals. They are referred to as **secondary resources** as they have already been collected, so the researcher is 'borrowing' the existing information which they will need to analyse and interpret the data for their own research purposes. There are different types of documents, which can be broadly classified as:

### Personal documents

Personal documents can be letters, diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, suicide notes, photos, videos, etc, which depict the meanings, opinions, feelings and experiences of an individual or small group of people. Some examples:

— **Autobiographies** for example, *Long Walk to Freedom* (1995) by Nelson Mandela, which is an account of his experiences and struggle against apartheid in South Africa.

— **Diaries** for example, *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1947), which provided a rich account of what life as a persecuted Jew was like during the Nazi occupation of Amsterdam in World War II.

### Public document

Public documents can derive from many sections of public life, such as government departments (eg, reports and official statistics), businesses, organisations, charities, schools, etc. They also include mass media sources such as television, newspapers, advertisements, magazines and the internet. An example:

— **The Macpherson Report (1999)** – a government report by Sir William Macpherson into the racially-motived murder of Stephen Lawrence and its poor handling by the Metropolitan Police including their failure to convict the 'obvious' suspects, which led to the police force being labelled 'institutionally racist'. The report recommended a number of government initiatives to tackle institutional racism within the police force.

### Historical document

Historical documents can either be public or personal, and have been created in the past. They can be very useful to sociologists as they are often the only sources available, especially if they want to examine and compare trends of social changes over a period of time. For example:

— **Geoffrey Pearson's 'Hooligans: A History of Respectable Fears' (1983)** analysed historical documents showing that there have been repeating cycles of moral panic about unprecedented levels of youth crime since the 16th century (1501-1600). His findings suggest that today's

perceived alarming rise in youth crime is not a new phenomenon but a misconception, as each generation has feared youth behaviour.

— **Philippe Aries' 'Centuries of Childhood' (1962)** investigates the history of 'childhood' (a stage of life with unique characteristics, eg, behaviour, play and dress), using historical documents such as medieval paintings to support the idea that 'childhood' did not exist in pre-modern European society, but that children were treated like little adults. It argues that it was not until the 18th century (1701-1800) that the notion of 'childhood' was created.

## Content analysis

Mass media resources such as TV programmes, advertisements, newspapers, magazines, speeches, songs and transcripts of interviews are often analysed by sociologists using **content analysis.** As the name suggests, this is a technique used to 'analyse' the 'content' of qualitative data. The purpose of content analysis is to summarise a large of amount of qualitative material by converting it into numerical form (quantitative data, ie, numbers).

**Sample material.** Once the researchers have identified their aims and hypothesis, they will need to select sample material which is representative of the topic of interest to be analysed (eg, which magazine), taking into consideration *quantity* (eg, 20 magazines), *frequency* (eg, every fortnight) and *length of time* (eg, over 6 months).

**Creating categories.** The researcher will need to analyse the material in a systematic manner. One way to do this is to create a grid sheet with named categories. How the researcher names each category will depend on what they are looking for in the material to be analysed. The information is then extracted from the material and recorded in the appropriate category. Depending on what the researcher wants to investigate, the analysis of the material can be based on words, themes, concepts or images. For example, a sociologist may decide to merely count and record how often instances occur on TV, using a tally score (eg, how many times a negative word is said). Below is an example of a content analysis study which aims to show how often males and females are portrayed in advertisements during week days and evenings, and at weekends.

|  | Daytime | Evening | Weekends |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Adult male** | 38 | 62 | 70 |
| **Adult female** | 69 | 48 | 50 |

## Who prefers documents, positivists or interpretivists?

— *Interpretivists* tend to like documents as they are mainly classified as **qualitative data.** They provide a rich and detailed account into people's meanings, thoughts, feelings and experiences, giving a deeper understanding of human behaviour. For this reason, they are preferred by interpretivists as they are high in validity.

— *Positivists* tend to reject documents as being unreliable and unrepresentative sources of information. However, some documents can be **quantitative data,** making them useful to positivists, such as government statistical publications (eg, on population, education and crime)

as they are presented mainly as facts and figures. Therefore, they find such documents are useful because they are easier to analyse and interpret than qualitative data, enabling the sociologist to draw conclusions about such issues as trends and relationships.

Positivists can also use qualitative data by converting them into quantitative data by the use of *content analysis.* This type of analysis enables the researcher to 'edit' the vast amount of written data by summarising them into numbers in a meaningful way (eg, tables, graphs and charts).

## Can we trust documents?

John Scott (1990) provides guidance on how to assess the usefulness (validity) of all types of documents by suggesting a four-point criteria check:

— **Authenticity.** This refers to authorship. Can we identify and verify that the piece of writing is the genuine work of the author, or is it a copy or a fake?

— **Credibility.** This refers to the accuracy of the document: is it free from error and distortion? Was the author sincere in their written material?

— **Representativeness.** Is the information typical of the same subject matter in that particular era (time/place) or is the information 'out of the ordinary'? If so, can we generalise from the information? If not, we need to treat it with caution.

— **Meaning.** This is concerned with the interpretation and understanding of the documents. What does the information tell us? Is it clear, or is it open to interpretation of the author's actual meaning?

## ✔✗ Strengths and limitations of using documents

### Strengths of using documents

#### *On a theoretical level*

✔ **Deeper insight.** Documents that produce qualitative data provide a better insight into people's lives and meanings. Those who adopt an interpretivist approach argue that this is the only way to get a better insight into really understanding people's motives and the reasons behind their behaviour.

#### *On a practical level*

✔ **They are readily available.** The use of documents as a research method is much cheaper and less time-consuming than other methods (eg, interviews and observations). This is because the researcher does not have to spend a great deal of money or time collecting their own information, as it already exists. This allows the analysis and interpretation of the data to be carried out relatively quickly.

✔ **Accessibility.** Personal documents may provide information on areas of social life which sociologists cannot readily study with primary research for a number of reasons. For example, Tony Blair's written memoirs, A Journey, (2010) are a personal account of life as a prime minister, and documents written by those engaging in illegal, secretive or deviant activities describe

circumstances where it would be unsafe for the researcher to collect data (eg, IRA, BNP or terrorist or extreme religious groups).

## Limitations of using documents

### *On a theoretical level*

✗ **Faulty memory.** Documents, especially personal and historical, are heavily dependent on people's memories and can be prone to 'false memory syndrome', that is, information may be distorted, selective or incorrect. This can reduce the validity of the information.

✗ **Bias.** Documents can be biased towards the writer's attitudes and opinions, and are written for a particular audience in mind. Again, this makes the validity difficult to prove.

✗ **Unrepresentativeness.** Documents, especially personal ones, often represent the experiences and events of an individual or a small group of people, and this makes them unrepresentative, so it is difficult to generalise from the findings. However, government statistical data, such as official statistics, are based on very large samples which make them representative of people's general views.

### *On an ethical level*

● **Consent given?** The original author or organisation must be informed and provide consent to use their material, especially if the research is of a sensitive nature. However, there may be practical problems to this as the person may be deceased or untraceable. This raises the ethical issue of whether it is acceptable to use (especially if it will be published) existing material if consent cannot be given.

● **Historical documents.** Informed consent cannot be given with many historical documents, as the author is often no longer alive. This raises the issue of invasion of privacy and confidentiality of data. Moreover, this sort of use is open to abuse as the researcher can alter the material by exploiting or distorting it to support their research purpose.

## Strengths of content analysis

✔ **Useful technique.** Content analysis is a very useful research technique for analysing and summarising a large body of qualitative material, allowing the researcher to draw conclusions from the data.

✔ **Reliability.** The data produced from content analysis can be reliable. This is because it can be easily repeated by other researchers using the same grid sheet to see if the same results are found.

✔ **No researcher effect.** Content/thematic analysis does not involve the researcher interacting with the participants because the information has already been gathered. This means that the research cannot influence the participants' behaviour, which makes the results more valid.

## Limitations of content analysis

✗ **Loss of insight.** Content analysis means counting up numbers and then describing the pattern or

relationship that these numbers seem to suggest. Interactionists claim that this has limited use as it cannot offer explanations as to why such patterns and relationships occur in the first place.

✗ **Reliability and validity issues.** Content analysis relies on the researcher's subjective interpretation. Different researchers may have different interpretations of the material, which may result in the recorded data being placed in incorrect categories. This inconsistency reduces the reliability and validity of the findings.

✗ **Unrepresentativeness.** A weakness of content/thematic analysis is that the few selected sample materials may be unrepresentative (eg, the selection of a few books or an interview transcript), which makes the findings difficult to generalise from.

## Methods in context:

### Using documents to investigate educational issues

Documents have been used to investigate a number of educational issues. Some common issues are:

— **Public/historical documents** (E.g. Ofsted inspections reports, school policies, prospectuses, governors meeting, educational)

— **Personal documents** (E.g. teachers written reports on pupils, pupils written work, pupil-to-pupil text messages, notes passed in classroom, pupil dairy)

### ✓✗ Strengths and limitations of using documents to investigate educational issues

#### Strengths of documents

##### *On a theoretical level*

✔ **Validity.** Personal documents can provide information that provides insight and understanding for certain meanings, beliefs and behaviours held by teachers and students. For example, a historical dairy written by student's during the Second World War gives valuable information as to what school life was under those conditions.

##### *On a practical level*

✔ **Cheaper and quicker.** Access to public documents is generally quick and easy and relatively cheap to acquire. However, this may not be true of all personal documents. Some personal documents may be more difficult to access if they are produced by pupils or teachers, as they may not want to have their personal information put 'in the spotlight', and thus may not allow the researcher to have access to them.

## Limitations of documents

### On a theoretical level

✗ **Validity.** Some personal documents are written with an audience in mind, that is, to be read by others, which means they may not provide a completely valid account. There is also the problem of interpretation and understanding. For example, an adult researcher may not accurately interpret correctly what a young pupil meant.

Also, some pubic documents may not provide a valid account. For example, school websites, school prospectuses, school inspection reports and assessment material can be manipulated in a way to present the school in a more desirable light that it really is. This is especially when schools need to attract 'pupils' to attend their school (manipulation of school prospectuses to attract parents) or to maximise funding (manipulation of school documents produced for government), or to increase a better Ofsted inspection report (e.g. unfavourable information/exam performances is suppressed is withheld by the school for inspectors).

✗ **Representativeness.** Information provided in personal documents will often be based on the personal experience of the teacher or pupils that produced it. This means the findings from such a small and unique sample will make it difficult to generalise.

### Ethical issues

✔ **Historical documents—no real ethical issues.** There are no ethical issues with public or historical documents because they are already in the public domain, which can be accessed by others.

✗ **Personal documents—issue of consent.** With personal documents, this can raise ethical issues. The researcher needs to seek consent to use it, from those who created the personal document, especially if the research is of a sensitive nature such as pupils or teacher's diary or school report.

✗ **Personal documents—issue of confidentiality.** There is also the issue of confidentiality with personal documents. For example, school or student reports are confidential documents, the researcher needs to guarantee the anonymity of who they refer to (unless there are legal, safety or health obligations).

## Practice exam questions

### AS level exam questions

#### Paper 1 – methods in context

**Item B – Investigating applications and admissions to secondary schools**

Sociologists are interested in the processes by which pupils and their parents apply to, and pupils are admitted to, secondary schools. Much evidence suggests that working-class and minority ethnic group pupils are less likely to apply or to gain admission to higher status schools with

good results. Sociologists sometimes study applications and admissions to secondary schools by analysing documents. For example, study of the home/school contracts of high status schools may show that they require parents to make commitments that poorer families cannot make. Similarly, if researchers can obtain application forms and entrance test papers, these can be analysed for cultural bias.

1. Applying material from **Item B** and your knowledge of research methods, evaluate the strengths and limitations of documents to investigate applications and admissions to secondary schools.

[20 marks]

### *Paper 2*

1. Outline **two** differences between public and personal documents. **[4 marks]**

2. Outline **two** reasons why "the content of newspapers and television programmes is generally treated with caution by researchers". **[4 marks]**

3. Outline **two** advantages of using personal and historical documents in sociological research.

**[4 marks]**

4. Outline **two** disadvantages of using personal documents in sociological research. **[4 marks]**

5. Outline **two** disadvantages of using public documents in sociological research. **[4 marks]**

6. Outline **two** disadvantages of using media reports in sociological research. **[4 marks]**

7. Outline **two** practical problems of using historical documents in sociological research. **[4 marks]**

8. Evaluate the disadvantages sociologists may find when using documents in their research.

[16 marks]

9. Evaluate the advantages sociologists may find when using documents in their research.

[16 marks]

## A level exam questions

### *Paper 1 – methods in context*

1. The 'methods in context' question is set at both AS and A level *(see above AS level exam question, paper 1)*.

### *Paper 1 and 3*

2. Outline and explain **two** problems of using secondary data in sociological research. **[10 marks]**

### *Paper 3*

3. Applying material from **Item (...)** and your knowledge, evaluate the usefulness of different kinds of secondary data in sociological research. **[20 marks]**