

Cambridge AS & A Level · Sociology 9699 · Notes

Theories about the role of education A2

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What you need to know

By the end of this topic you should be able to:

1. **Explain functionalist views** of how schooling builds **value consensus** (agreement on shared norms and values) and **social solidarity** (people feeling bound together as one society).
2. **Explain role allocation**: the functionalist claim that education sorts people by ability into the jobs that suit them, through **meritocracy**, and the arguments against it.
3. **Explain Marxist views** of how education helps keep the **capitalist economic system** going.
4. **Explain education as ideological control and cultural reproduction**: how schools spread ideas that make inequality look fair, and how they pass class advantage (and disadvantage) from parents to children.
5. **Explain New Right and social democratic views** on how education and the economy are linked.

Exam questions also use **feminist**, **interactionist** and **postmodernist** ideas as criticisms of these views, so they are covered here as evaluation. Why some groups achieve more than others is in the attainment notes, and the curriculum in detail in the note on influences on the curriculum.

Understand it

One question, several answers

Every theory in this topic answers the same question: **what is education for, and who gains from it?** Hold that question in your head and the theories line up as rival answers rather than a list of names.

<i>perspective</i>	<i>main role of education</i> → <i>who gains</i>
Functionalism	shared values, solidarity, sorting by talent → society as a whole
Marxism	reproduces and justifies class inequality → the ruling class and capitalism
New Right	competitive workforce via a school market → the economy and choosing parents
Social democratic	equal opportunity and economic growth → everyone, if the state invests
Feminism	passes on gender inequality → men and patriarchy

Consensus views (functionalism, and in a different way the New Right and social democrats) say education can benefit everyone. **Conflict** views (Marxism, feminism) say it mainly benefits a powerful group. Interactionists and postmodernists are mostly used to attack both sides: pupils are not passive, and societies are too diverse for one role.

Functionalism: value consensus and social solidarity

Functionalists see society as a set of connected institutions that keep it stable. Once children leave the family, the school becomes the main agency of **secondary socialisation**.

Durkheim (writing about France around 1900) gave school three jobs:

- **Building solidarity.** A modern society is made of strangers. School gives children a shared stock of knowledge, history and values, so they feel part of one society; Durkheim called this shared moral outlook the **collective conscience**. History lessons, for example, give pupils a common story of where "we" came from.
- **Society in miniature.** In class a child must work alongside people who are not family and obey rules that apply to everyone. This is a rehearsal for adult life with colleagues and laws.
- **Specialist skills.** A complex economy has a detailed **division of labour**, so school teaches the varied skills that different jobs need, which makes people depend on each other.

Parsons (USA, 1950s–60s) added that school is a **bridge** between the family and wider society:

- At home a child is judged by **particularistic standards**: rules that apply to them as a son or daughter, and status that is **ascribed** (given at birth).
- In society, and in school, everyone is measured against the same rules and tests: **universalistic standards**. Status is **achieved** by effort and ability.
- School teaches two core values of modern society: **achievement** (you should strive to succeed) and **equality of opportunity** (everyone gets a fair chance). Pupils who learn these accept that the results are fair.

How schools actually do it (useful for 4-mark questions):

School process	How it spreads shared values
Rules, with rewards and sanctions	Pupils who are praised for being on time and punished for lateness come to treat punctuality and obedience as normal and right
One standard for everyone (same exam, same uniform)	Pupils learn that the same rules apply whatever your family, which is the universalistic outlook adult life needs
Assemblies, sports days, prize-givings, the national anthem	Shared rituals make pupils feel part of a group larger than themselves, so loyalty to school becomes loyalty to the nation
The formal curriculum (history, literature, religious or civic education)	Lessons hold up national heroes and approved values as examples to copy
The hidden curriculum	Lessons nobody announces, such as respecting teachers, waiting your turn and (some critics add) what is "normal" for boys and girls, are learned from how school is run

Strengths of the functionalist view: it explains why almost every modern state funds mass schooling; it shows positive effects that conflict theories play down (literacy, shared citizenship, skills); evidence of girls' and some ethnic minorities' rising results fits the idea of achieved status.

Limitations: it assumes the values taught are **everyone's**, when Marxists say they are the ruling class's and feminists say they are men's; it treats pupils as passive sponges, yet many reject school values (**anti-school subcultures**); schools are divided (private and state, religious and secular, streamed classes), which splits pupils rather than uniting them; in a diverse, globalised society there may be no single set of values to pass on (postmodernists).

Role allocation and meritocracy

Davis and Moore argued that every society must fill its most **functionally important** jobs (doctors, engineers, judges) with its most **talented** people.

- Education **sifts and sorts** pupils: tests and qualifications measure ability, and the most able go furthest.
- Those jobs carry the **highest rewards**, which motivates able people to put up with long training.
- The result is a **meritocracy**: positions are earned by **ability plus effort**, not inherited.

Support: rising numbers with qualifications at every level; better results for working-class, female and ethnic minority pupils than a generation ago; **Saunders** argued that differences in ability and effort explain more of who succeeds than class background does; **Herrnstein and Murray** linked success to measured intelligence; policies such as **compensatory education** (extra help for disadvantaged areas) and a common national curriculum widen opportunity.

Arguments against role allocation (often asked as "arguments against"):

- **Unequal starting lines.** Talented children from poor families, some ethnic groups or, in some societies, girls may leave school early or never get the chance to compete, so the "most suitable" person may never reach the race. **Tumin** pointed out that unequal opportunity stops a society finding all its talent.
- **Material factors.** Poverty means poor housing, no quiet place to study, poor diet and pressure to earn early, so able pupils underachieve.
- **Cultural factors.** Children whose home culture matches the school's (**cultural capital**) do better whatever their talent; older **cultural deprivation** theories blame missing language or values at home instead.
- **In-school factors.** Teachers' **labelling**, **streaming** and **setting** can lock pupils into low expectations regardless of their ability.
- **Faulty measuring tools.** IQ tests, exams and job interviews may measure middle-class knowledge and confidence, not ability.
- **Who you know.** Family contacts and networks (**social capital**) often decide who gets top jobs, whatever the qualifications.
- **Outdated sorting.** Schools may train for jobs the economy no longer needs, so qualifications do not match roles.
- **"Important" is a value judgement.** Tumin asked who decides that a lawyer is more important than a refuse collector, whose absence would quickly harm public health. The argument becomes circular: a job is called important because it pays well.

Marxism: education serves capitalism

Marxists divide capitalist society into the **bourgeoisie** (who own businesses and capital) and the **proletariat** (who sell their labour). Schools, like other institutions, help the owners keep their position.

Althusser distinguished two ways a ruling class keeps control:

- The **repressive state apparatus** (police, courts, army) uses force.
- **Ideological state apparatuses** (ISAs), such as the media, religion and above all education, use **ideas**. Through school, each generation learns to see capitalism as normal and fair. Education does two jobs at once: it **reproduces** a workforce with the skills and attitudes employers want, and it **legitimises** (justifies) inequality.

Bowles and Gintis (from a study of US high schools in the 1970s) argued that schools are shaped to match the workplace, the **correspondence principle**. They found pupils who were obedient, punctual and hard-working got better grades than creative or independent ones, so the school rewards what a boss rewards. The matching runs through the **hidden curriculum**:

school	capitalist workplace
<i>concept (Bowles and Gintis)</i>	
	<i>hierarchy</i>
head → teachers → pupils	←→ managers → supervisors → staff
	<i>extrinsic rewards</i>
grades and certificates	←→ wages
	<i>fragmentation</i>
knowledge split into subjects	←→ jobs split into small tasks
	<i>lack of control</i>
no say over the curriculum	←→ no say over the product
	<i>obeying rules</i>
bells, punctuality, uniform	←→ shifts, punctuality, dress code

They also called meritocracy a **myth**: in their data, a pupil's family background predicted later income better than their test scores. Because pupils believe success is earned, those who fail **blame themselves**, not the system, and accept low-paid work. This is how school turns inequality into something that looks deserved.

Other Marxist arguments:

- **Willis** (*Learning to Labour*) followed twelve working-class boys, "the lads", in an English school. They formed a **counter-school culture**, mocked hard-working pupils and valued having a laugh. They left with few qualifications and chose manual jobs. Willis showed that the lads were not simply brainwashed: they **saw through** the promise of meritocracy, yet their resistance still delivered them to the factory floor. Willis supports Marxism (class is reproduced) and criticises Bowles and Gintis (pupils are not passive).
- **Rikowski** argued that education is being turned into a **business**: private companies run schools and sell services, testing and software, so education becomes a **commodity** sold for profit worldwide.
- **Marketisation** and **vocationalism** (job-related courses) can be read as capitalism shaping schools directly: working-class pupils are steered towards low-status vocational routes.

Ideological control and cultural reproduction

These two ideas explain **how** the system keeps itself going without force.

Ideological control means shaping how people think so they do not challenge those in power.

- Through the ISA and the hidden curriculum, pupils learn to accept **hierarchy** and **authority**.
- The myth of meritocracy creates **false class consciousness**: workers do not see that the system is unfair, so they do not organise against it.
- **Young** argued that what counts as worthwhile knowledge is chosen by the powerful: abstract, written, academic subjects get high status, practical skills low status. The children of the powerful arrive already used to the high-status kind.
- Critics add that an **ethnocentric curriculum** (one that centres the dominant ethnic group's history and culture) and a **gendered curriculum** are ideological too, serving dominant ethnic groups or men.

Cultural reproduction comes from **Bourdieu**.

- Middle-class families pass on **cultural capital**: tastes, ways of speaking, knowledge of books, museums and how exams work. Bourdieu called the set of habits and tastes a person absorbs from their class their **habitus**.
- School treats the middle-class habitus as "natural intelligence", so middle-class children look gifted and working-class children look lacking. Their advantage is turned into qualifications (**educational capital**), and then into well-paid jobs (**economic capital**).
- Each generation's class position is therefore **reproduced** in the next, while everyone believes the results reflect merit. Bourdieu called this hidden imposition of one class's culture **symbolic violence**.

Strengths of the Marxist view: it explains why class gaps in results persist despite decades of reform; it exposes the hidden curriculum; it links education to economic power, which functionalism ignores; Bourdieu's ideas are backed by research on parental choice and university entry.

Limitations: it is **deterministic**, treating pupils as puppets, when Willis and **Giroux** show pupils resisting and negotiating; it ignores real **mobility** (many working-class people gain degrees); **feminists** say it ignores gender, and that patriarchy matters as much as class; it ignores the many teachers who encourage **critical thinking** (sociology itself questions capitalism); **Bowles and Gintis'** evidence comes from one country decades ago; **postmodernists** say today's flexible economy wants creative, independent workers, not obedient ones, so correspondence no longer holds.

The New Right: markets make education serve the economy

The **New Right** accept that education should sort people by ability and pass on shared values, as functionalists do, but they think **state-run** education does this badly.

- State schools are run like monopolies: with guaranteed pupils, they have no reason to improve. **Chubb and Moe** argued that schools facing competition get better results.
- The answer is **marketisation**: parents choose schools as consumers, funding follows pupils, and **league tables** show which schools perform. Bad schools must improve or close.
- Education's main job is to make the nation **competitive**: schools should teach skills employers need, through **vocational** courses, apprenticeships and close links with business.
- A shared **national curriculum** and national tests keep standards up and pass on a common culture.

Criticisms: **Ball** and others found that markets favour middle-class parents, who have the money, time and know-how to win places at the best schools (sometimes called **parentocracy**), so inequality grows; league tables push schools to select able pupils and neglect weaker ones; Marxists say vocational schemes simply train working-class young people for low-paid jobs; the New Right want both freedom for schools and central control of the curriculum, which pull in opposite directions.

Social democrats: equal opportunity and economic growth

Social democratic sociologists, such as **Halsey**, argued that fairness and prosperity go together.

- If bright working-class children leave school early, their talent is **wasted**, and the economy loses skilled workers it needs. Educating everyone to their full potential is **investment** in **human capital** (the skills of the population), which pays back in economic growth.
- The **state** must therefore fund free, high-quality schooling for all: non-selective (comprehensive) schools, expanded universities, and **compensatory education** for disadvantaged areas.
- Education also benefits individuals, by opening routes to social mobility, and society, by reducing inequality and building a fairer, more cohesive nation.

Criticisms: **Wolf** argued that pouring money into more education does not automatically raise growth, and that many qualifications add little value; the New Right say state spending is wasteful and markets do better; Marxists say equal opportunity cannot exist while family wealth and cultural capital differ, and decades of expansion left class gaps largely in place.

Feminist, interactionist and postmodernist critiques

These are not set as views to evaluate in this topic, but they are rich sources of arguments **against** both functionalism and Marxism.

- **Feminists:** schools historically steered girls into domestic and caring subjects and boys into science and technology (a **gendered curriculum**), and the hidden curriculum taught that leadership is male. Education therefore helped maintain **patriarchy**, not consensus or capitalism alone. Liberal feminists reply that girls now outperform boys in many countries, so progress is real.
- **Interactionists:** what happens in classrooms (labelling, the self-fulfilling prophecy, streaming) shapes outcomes, so neither consensus nor class control is automatic; pupils negotiate and resist.
- **Postmodernists** (such as **Usher and Edwards**): society is now fragmented and diverse, learning is lifelong and individual, and no grand theory can name *the* role of education; schools increasingly cater for different identities rather than one shared culture.

Key facts and formulas

There is no formula list in Sociology. "Learn it" means you must remember it.

Key term	Status
Durkheim: social solidarity, collective conscience, school as society in miniature, specialist skills for the division of labour	Learn it
Parsons: school as bridge from family to society; particularistic to universalistic standards; ascribed to achieved status; values of achievement and equality of opportunity	Learn it
Davis and Moore: role allocation, sifting and sorting, meritocracy, functionally important jobs; critic Tumin	Learn it
Value consensus processes: rules with rewards and sanctions, universalistic standards, rituals (assemblies), formal curriculum, hidden curriculum	Learn it

Key term	Status
Althusser: repressive state apparatus versus ideological state apparatus; education reproduces labour power and legitimises inequality	Learn it
Bowles and Gintis: correspondence principle (hierarchy, extrinsic rewards, fragmentation, lack of control), hidden curriculum, myth of meritocracy	Learn it
Bourdieu: cultural capital, habitus, cultural reproduction, symbolic violence; Young: high-status knowledge chosen by the powerful	Learn it
Willis (<i>Learning to Labour</i>): counter-school culture, the lads' resistance still reproduces class; Giroux: resistance; Rikowski: education as a commodity for profit	Learn it
New Right (Chubb and Moe, Saunders): marketisation, parental choice, league tables, vocationalism, national curriculum; critic Ball (middle-class advantage)	Learn it
Social democratic (Halsey): equal opportunity, wasted talent, human capital, state investment, compensatory education; critic Wolf	Learn it
Paper 3: Question 1 $2 \times 2 = 4$; Question 2 $2 \times 4 = 8$; Question 3 $2 \times 6 = 12$; Question 4 essay AO1 10, AO2 6, AO3 10	Learn it

How to do it

We have tagged 39 questions for this topic (2021–2026, all from Paper 3), 34 different (the same questions were set on Papers 31 and 33 each November). None mix two types.

Question type	Questions
Evaluate a view about the role of education (26-mark essay)	20
Give two arguments against a stated view (12 marks)	11
Describe two ways/examples (4 marks)	7
Explain two ways (8 marks)	1

The four Paper 3 questions add up to $4 + 8 + 12 + 26 = 50$ marks.

1. Evaluate a view about the role of education (26-mark essay) (20 questions)

Always Question 4. Views asked (counting tagged questions): education serves or maintains capitalism or the economic system (5); ideological or social control, legitimising inequality or getting pupils to accept their place (4); value consensus or social solidarity (4); role allocation or meritocracy (3); the functionalist view or maintaining the social system (2); economic benefits for society (2).

Marked **AO1** knowledge and understanding 10, **AO2** interpretation and application 6, **AO3** analysis and evaluation 10, so $10 + 6 + 10 = 26$.

1. **Introduction** (two or three sentences): say whose view it is and pin down its key word ("meritocracy means...", "value consensus means...").
2. **For the view** (4–5 paragraphs): each a point, explained, backed by a named sociologist, study or concept, and ended with a sentence tying it to the question's exact words.
3. **Against the view** (4–5 paragraphs): the rival theory and the critiques, each written as a **criticism of the view**, not as a separate summary.
4. **Conclusion**: a reasoned judgement on **how far** the view holds, for whom, and where.

Functionalist views set (consensus, solidarity, role allocation, meritocracy, economic benefits):

- **For:** Durkheim (collective conscience, society in miniature, specialist skills); Parsons (bridge, universalistic standards, achievement); Davis and Moore (sifting and sorting); rituals and the hidden curriculum; rising attainment of girls and minorities; Saunders; compensatory education and a common curriculum; social democrats (equal opportunity drives growth); the New Right (individual effort rewarded).
- **Against:** Marxists (whose values? ruling-class ideology, ISA, myth of meritocracy); Bourdieu (cultural capital rewarded, not talent); material deprivation; marketisation helping the middle class; labelling and streaming; institutional racism and an ethnocentric curriculum; feminists (patriarchy, gendered curriculum); anti-school subcultures (Willis); divisions between private, religious and state schools; postmodern diversity; Tumin on "important" roles.

Marxist views set (serves capitalism, legitimises inequality, ideological or social control):

- **For:** Althusser (ISA, reproduction and legitimation); Bowles and Gintis (correspondence principle, hidden curriculum, myth of meritocracy); Bourdieu (cultural reproduction); Willis (class reproduced even through resistance); Young (high-status knowledge); vocationalism; Rikowski (education as a global commodity); private schools training an elite.
- **Against:** functionalists (shared values, solidarity and role allocation benefit everyone); social democrats (reforms have raised mobility); the New Right (markets serve the whole economy); pupil agency and resistance (Willis, Giroux, interactionists), so control is not effective; teaching critical thinking; feminists (patriarchy matters as much as class); postmodernists (flexible economy, diverse learners).

Evaluation moves that lift AO3: say **why** a counter-point damages the view (not just that another view exists); attack the **evidence** (Bowles and Gintis studied US schools in the 1970s); show that a study cuts both ways (Willis shows reproduction **and** resistance); note where rivals agree (both functionalists and Marxists accept that schools pass on values and sort pupils, but disagree on who gains); say the view fits some places and times better than others.

2. Give two arguments against a stated view (12 marks) (11 questions)

Always Question 3. Views quoted (counting tagged questions): education maintains value consensus or social solidarity (3); it maintains the existing social order (1); schools are effective agents of social control (2); education's main role is a labour force for capitalism (2); education is for the individual or their personal development (2); education fills the important roles with the most suitable people (1).

Each argument is marked separately out of 6 by levels: 1–2 for a bare point, 3–4 for a clear point whose material is not fully linked, **5–6** for a clear, developed argument supported by concepts, theory or evidence, with its relevance stated.

1. Write **two** separate paragraphs ("The first argument against this view...", "A second argument...").
2. Make each a **different** argument: usually one from a rival theory and one from evidence or logic.
3. In each, name the material (a sociologist, study or concept) and explain how it works.
4. End each with a sentence saying why this **undermines the view in the quotation**.
5. Write nothing in support of the view: it earns no marks.

Ready-made arguments against each view:

- **Against consensus or solidarity:** Marxism (the values are the ruling class's, ISA); Bourdieu (a working-class child meets a school built around tastes and speech learned in middle-class homes, so the "shared" culture is really one class's); feminism (patriarchy); ethnocentric curriculum and institutional racism; anti-school subcultures (Willis); pupils are split up rather than united, since fee-paying and state schools, faith schools, single-sex schools and streamed classes each mix with their own kind; education teaches pupils to question society; postmodern diversity; it teaches competition and individualism rather than solidarity.
- **Against "maintains the existing social order":** here Marxism, Bourdieu and the ISA **support** the view, so use arguments that schooling changes society instead. Mobility: when qualifications let able pupils rise above their parents' class, the order is reshuffled each generation (functionalist meritocracy, social democrats). Democracy: mass literacy lets citizens read, vote and campaign, which has fed reform movements. Policy: anti-racist and anti-sexist programmes, and the rise of girls' results, show schools reducing old inequalities. Alternative schools, such as democratic or free schools where pupils help set the rules, are founded precisely to question how mainstream society is run. Agency: teachers who encourage critical thinking and pupils who resist (Willis, Giroux) mean school does not simply copy the present.
- **Against effective social control:** if schools controlled pupils well, there would be few lessons wrecked by bad behaviour, few pupils skipping school or being sent home, and little offending by teenagers, yet all of these are common; Willis and Giroux on agency; pupils resisting racist or sexist labels; critical subjects; mobility shows the order is not fixed.
- **Against "labour force for capitalism":** functionalist solidarity and consensus; when the ablest people end up as surgeons and pilots, patients and passengers gain too, so sorting by talent is a gain for the whole population and not only for employers; social democrats on equal opportunity and personal development; feminists (patriarchy is more central); education for critical thinking and human rights.
- **Against "for the individual":** functionalists (education serves society's needs: consensus, solidarity, role allocation); the economy's or capitalism's needs (New Right, Marxists); conflict theorists ask who really gains, and answer with a group, not the individual pupil: the bourgeoisie (Marxists), men (feminists) or the majority ethnic group whose culture fills the curriculum; a standard curriculum and exam pressure leave little room for each pupil's development.
- **Against "the most suitable fill the important roles":** use the list under Role allocation above (unequal access, material and cultural factors, in-school factors, faulty tests, social capital, outdated sorting, Tumin).

3. Describe two ways/examples (4 marks) (7 questions)

Always Question 1. Asked as ways schools promote values, consensus or socialisation (3), contribute to the economy (2), reflect the capitalist workplace (1) and act as a commodity for private profit (1).

1. Write two bullet points.
2. For each: **name** the way (1), then one sentence on **how** it does what the question asks (1).
3. Pick concrete school processes, not just a concept: "assemblies" with how they build shared values, not just "the hidden curriculum".

Ideas for each version:

- **Values or consensus:** rules with rewards and sanctions; uniform and the same exams for all; assemblies, sports day; history and civic lessons; the hidden curriculum.
- **The economy:** literacy and numeracy for the whole workforce; qualifications in science and technology; vocational training; role allocation; values such as competition and enterprise; education as an industry that employs people and earns money.
- **The capitalist workplace:** any of the correspondence pairs in the diagram above.
- **Commodity for profit:** fee-charging private schools and universities; private tutoring; universities recruiting fee-paying international students and opening campuses abroad; exam boards selling international qualifications; firms selling textbooks, apps and online courses.

4. Explain two ways (8 marks) (1 question)

Question 2, asked once on this topic: two ways education serves the rich and powerful.

1. Two paragraphs, each worth up to 4.
2. In each: make the point, explain how it works, add sociological material (a sociologist or concept), and show how that material supports the point. Examiners report that points without material stall at 2 of the 4.
3. Strong choices: the correspondence principle (Bowles and Gintis); cultural capital (Bourdieu); the myth of meritocracy; elite private schools training leaders and building contacts; high-status knowledge chosen by the powerful (Young); marketisation favouring wealthy parents.

Worked examples

Example 1

Describe two ways schools can create a sense of national identity. [4]

- **Teaching a national history (1):** lessons about the country's founding events and heroes give every pupil the same story of "our past", so children from different backgrounds see themselves as members of one nation (1).

- **Shared ceremonies (1)**: singing the national anthem or raising the flag on special days makes pupils act together as one group, so pride in the country is felt, not just taught **(1)**.

Two ways, each named and described: **4 marks**.

Example 2

Explain two ways education can help economic growth, according to social democratic sociologists. **[8]**

Way 1. The first way is that education stops **talent being wasted (1)**. If clever children from poor homes leave school at fourteen, the country loses the engineers, doctors and teachers they could have become **(1)**. Halsey argued that free, non-selective schooling and wider university access let the state find ability in every class **(1)**, so more skilled workers enter the labour market and productivity rises **(1)**.

Way 2. The second way is that spending on schools works as **investment in human capital (1)**. A workforce that can read technical manuals, use computers and learn new methods lets firms adopt new technology faster **(1)**. Social democrats used this idea to justify **compensatory education** in deprived areas **(1)**: raising the skills of the weakest pupils lifts the whole workforce, which feeds growth rather than costing money **(1)**.

Two ways, each made, explained, supported and linked: **8 marks**.

Example 3

'Introducing market competition between schools makes education serve the economy better.'

Using sociological material, give two arguments against this view. **[12]**

Argument 1. The first argument against this view is that markets increase inequality, so talent is wasted rather than used. Ball found that middle-class parents, with their cultural capital, time and money for transport or moving house, are far better at working the system of school choice. Popular schools fill with their children, while schools in poor areas lose funding and pupils. Able working-class children end up in struggling schools, so the economy loses skills it needs: the market sorts pupils by family background, not by ability, which defeats the economic purpose claimed for it. **Level 3 (5–6 marks)**.

Argument 2. A second argument comes from Marxists: competition serves employers, not the economy as a whole. League tables push schools towards safe, test-driven teaching, and the vocational routes the New Right favour steer working-class pupils into low-paid work. Rikowski argues that private firms now profit from running schools, testing and selling learning materials, so marketisation turns education into a commodity. On this view the "better" economy is a richer bourgeoisie, while most pupils are prepared to accept low-status jobs, so the benefit is not shared. **Level 3 (5–6 marks)**.

Two clear, developed arguments, each with named material and a closing link to the view: **12 marks**.

Example 4

Evaluate the view that education mainly reproduces class inequality from one generation to the next. **[26]**

Introduction. This is a Marxist view: instead of giving every child an equal chance, schools hand the advantages of middle-class parents to their children and the disadvantages of working-class parents to theirs, while making the outcome look fair.

For the view (AO1/AO2).

- **Cultural reproduction:** Bourdieu argues that schools reward the middle-class habitus as if it were natural ability, so cultural capital becomes qualifications and then well-paid jobs.
- **Correspondence:** Bowles and Gintis show the hidden curriculum trains working-class pupils for obedient, fragmented work, and family background predicts income better than test scores.
- **Legitimation:** the myth of meritocracy makes those who fail blame themselves (Althusser's ISA), so inequality passes on without protest.
- **Self-reproduction:** Willis's lads rejected school and chose manual work, reproducing their class position through their own culture.
- **Markets and private schools:** Ball shows middle-class parents win the best places; elite private schools pass on contacts as well as knowledge.

Against the view (AO3).

- **However**, functionalists argue education allocates roles by ability: Davis and Moore see sifting and sorting as efficient, and Saunders claims ability and effort explain more of success than class. If this is right, inequality is earned, not reproduced, though Saunders' measures of ability may themselves reflect cultural capital.
- **Social democrats** point to real mobility: mass higher education has given millions of working-class students degrees, so reproduction is weaker than Marxists suggest, even if class gaps remain.
- **Feminists** argue that class is not the only inequality schooling reproduces: gender and ethnic inequalities (a gendered or ethnocentric curriculum) cut across class, so "class inequality" is too narrow.
- **Agency:** Willis himself shows pupils see through school, and Giroux argues schools are places of struggle, so reproduction is not automatic.
- **Postmodernists** say today's flexible economy rewards creativity and constant retraining, so the old link between school and factory no longer holds.

Conclusion. Persistent class gaps in results support the view, and Bourdieu explains them better than functionalism, which assumes the race is fair. But reproduction is a tendency, not a law: mobility, the rise of girls and pupil resistance show education can disrupt inequality as well as pass it on. The view is **largely** true for class, but too narrow and too deterministic as an account of education's **main** role.

How it would be marked. A wide range of detailed points with sociologists and concepts (AO1 9–10), applied throughout to "reproduces class inequality" (AO2 5–6), and each counter-argument weighed rather than just listed, with a justified conclusion (AO3 9–10). In the exam, make each bullet a full paragraph.

Common mistakes

- **Juxtaposition in essays.** The most common complaint in examiner reports: a functionalist block followed by a Marxist block, with no weighing. Use each rival view to show **why** the view in the question is weak.
- **Concepts dropped in without explanation.** Writing "Althusser says education is an ISA" earns little; explain how the ISA does what the question is about.
- **Drifting from the question's key word.** In a social solidarity essay, describing how Marxists explain working-class underachievement misses the point; tie every argument to solidarity. The same goes for "meritocracy", "economic system" and "social control".
- **Arguing for the view in Question 3.** The question asks only for arguments against; explaining or supporting the view earns nothing. Some candidates even misread "value consensus" and wrote the functionalist case.
- **Naming a concept instead of a process in Question 1.** "Secondary socialisation" alone is too general: name a specific school process (assemblies, uniform, rules) and say how it does the job.
- **Missing the "how" mark in Question 1.** Naming two ways without describing how they promote values or help the economy caps the answer at 2.
- **No material in Question 2.** Two good points without a sociologist or concept stall at 2 marks each.
- **Long introductions and definitions** (for example a page on what education is), which earn nothing and eat essay time.
- **Unsure where the New Right and social democrats fit.** Decide whether you are using them **for** or **against** the view, and say so.
- **Answering with general achievement material** (material deprivation, language codes) in Question 3 or 4 without linking it to the view about education's role.

How to get the marks

- **"Describe two..." (4 marks):** two bullet points, each named and described in one sentence. No introduction, no theorist needed.
- **"Explain two..." (8 marks):** two paragraphs, each point → how it works → sociologist or concept → how that supports the point.
- **"Using sociological material, give two arguments against this view" (12 marks):** two separate, developed arguments, each with named material and a closing sentence on why it weakens the quoted view. Arguments can attack the view's **logic or evidence** as well as offer a rival view.
- **"Evaluate..." (26 marks):** AO1 10 for a wide range of detailed points with concepts and research; AO2 6 for applying them to the exact wording; AO3 10 for evaluation that is explicit and sustained. A descriptive account of the other side, however good, stops at the 7–8 band for AO3.
- **Sociological material** means a named sociologist (Durkheim, Parsons, Davis and Moore, Althusser, Bowles and Gintis, Bourdieu, Willis, Halsey, Chubb and Moe, Ball), a theory, or a concept (collective conscience, universalistic standards, meritocracy, ISA, correspondence principle, cultural capital, marketisation, human capital).

- **Balance and judgement:** the strongest essays argue both sides at similar length, show that a claim can be partly true (more for some groups, times or places), and end with a conclusion that weighs the evidence used.
- **Use your own knowledge of society:** examiners credit relevant awareness, such as how schooling differs between countries.

Quick check

1. What is the difference between particularistic and universalistic standards, and why does Parsons think school must teach the second?
2. Which sociologist is linked to each idea? (a) Ideological state apparatus. (b) Correspondence principle. (c) Cultural capital and habitus. (d) Society in miniature. (e) Functionally important jobs and sifting and sorting.
3. Give one New Right and one social democratic reason for linking education to the economy, and one criticism of each.
4. How can Willis's study be used both to support and to criticise the Marxist view?
5. In Question 3 (12 marks), how many marks can each argument earn, and what lifts an argument into the top level?

Answers

1. **Particularistic** standards judge a child as a particular person (a son or daughter), as the family does; **universalistic** standards judge everyone by the same rules. Parsons argued adult society runs on universalistic rules and achieved status, so school must make the move from family to society.
2. (a) Althusser. (b) Bowles and Gintis. (c) Bourdieu. (d) Durkheim. (e) Davis and Moore.
3. New Right: competition and vocational training make the workforce competitive; criticism: markets favour middle-class parents (Ball), widening inequality. Social democratic: educating all talent is investment in human capital that drives growth; criticism: Wolf argues more education spending does not automatically raise growth.
4. **Support**: the lads ended up in manual jobs, so school reproduced their class position. **Criticism**: they actively rejected school and saw through meritocracy, so pupils are not passive puppets as Bowles and Gintis assume.
5. **6 marks** each, so 12 in total. A clear, **developed** argument supported by sociological material (concept, theory or evidence) whose relevance to the view is made explicit reaches 5–6.

Past questions to try

- [9699/32/M/J/23 Q1](#): two ways education contributes to the economy.
- [9699/33/O/N/23 Q3](#): two arguments against schools being an effective agency of social control.
- [9699/32/F/M/24 Q4](#): essay on whether education is an agent of social control.
- [9699/32/O/N/24 Q4](#): essay on whether education's main function is to maintain social solidarity.