

Three Functions of Education: Qualification, Allocation, and Socialisation

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When we think of what societies hope to achieve with formal education, the goals are plenty. We want students to acquire skills, and obtain diplomas. We want students to be well-prepared for the labour market, so that they can find jobs easily, and get a position linked to their training. And we want education to socialize students into society at large, so they can take part in society as active citizens.

When we think of the goals of education, we can formulate the *functions* of education for society. These functions are not so much about what individual students hope to achieve—or what societies hope to achieve for their young inhabitants—but principally refer to targets, or goals of education, at the societal level. In other words, a consideration of the functions of education refers to the macro-level, the level of society. But of course what societies hope to achieve through education goes through the attainments and life transitions of their individual inhabitants. This means that thinking of the functions of education is deeply sociological: it connects the micro and the macro, and does so by examining the formal and informal norms, rules and regulations that govern educational systems.

We can distinguish three main functions of education for society: qualification, allocation, and socialisation. Qualification refers to the function that students get well-educated to enter their adult lives. Valuable skills are produced at various levels, valuable diplomas are obtained. An educational system can be seen to ‘function well’ if the creation of skills and qualifications goes well.

The allocation function refers to the sorting process from education to structural positions in society, most prominently related to the working life. Do the skills and qualifications that students



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have obtained fit with the demands on the labour market? Does the sorting process from school to work go smoothly? Do the qualifications of potential workers provide reliable and valuable information for employers when they search for personnel? If this is the case, one could say that the educational system functions well with regard to allocation.

The socialisation function of education considers how schools are able to socialise students into the dominant norms and values in society. Educational systems are perhaps the only (or certainly the most important) institutional context in which all young inhabitants in a society take part. This makes schools potentially very effective places to socialise students into the dominant values in society. For instance, in liberal democracies, students can be socialised towards the apprehension and appreciation of democratic institutions, for instance by learning how democracy works, what it entails, and which national, regional or local institutions exist that make democracy work. Education may enhance the competencies to be active citizens, take care of each other, and protect the natural environment.

Now that we have defined three functions of education, it is possible to investigate patterns in society to see how well educational systems are doing. How well are educational systems ‘functioning’ with regard to qualification, allocation, and socialisation? We can define individual-level outcomes that allow us to judge how well education lives up to its task. But is a better functioning system simply the system where the outcomes are maximized? Does the qualification function go well if average PISA scores are high, or many university degrees are produced? Is socialization successful if the turnout at elections is maximized? This may be a bit too simplistic. In fact, to assess the relevant outcomes, we need to take account of two distributional concerns: *efficiency* and *equality*.

An efficient system would, given a certain budget for education, indeed maximize the outcome, for instance by maximizing the PISA score among a student population, or reduce youth unemployment, maximize economic growth, or maximize political participation. But also equality is a distributional concern: a well-functioning educational system would also offer equal



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opportunities to reach a certain PISA score, or a university qualification. Equality of opportunity in the allocation function would furthermore imply that finding employment is not limited to the well-educated. And equality in civic engagement refers to equality of representation, which, in democracy, is fundamental.

As said, such efficiency and equality concerns exist for all three functions, but may be differentially important for the different functions depending on one's political views. For political and civic engagement, for instance, it may be harder to legitimize a strengthening of individual differences, which may, on the other hand, to some extent be desirable for the qualification function.

Education is aimed at selection, with longer school careers typically offered to students who perform well in school. This selection process leads to a differentiation of qualifications, that is useful for an effective allocation process from school to work, serving the allocation function. But regarding civic and political engagement it would perhaps be desirable if an educational system reduces variations among students. Given the strong impact of parental background and home socialization on students' civic engagement, it is through the schooling system that at least some of the variation among students can be reduced in knowledge about institutions, support for democracy, or trust in politicians. As political philosophers teach us, the main principle of justice that should govern the relationship between the state and its citizens is the principle of equality. Civic and political engagement is, par excellence, a matter of democratic equality, and an educational system that increases inequalities by education may indirectly increase democratic inequalities by social class.

The role of policy makers is to see the trade-offs. A well-known, but contested, trade-off is between equality and efficiency; are outcomes more easily maximized (standing for efficiency) if more inequality is accepted? Does striving for equality come at a cost in terms of efficient learning? Overall there is very little evidence for this trade-off; systems that are more egalitarian are usually also the systems where the efficiency is highest, not lowest. One reason for this is that



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disadvantaged students, either in terms of their performance level or their socioeconomic background, benefit more from high quality education than advantaged students.

Another trade-off that is less well-known is that between the different functions of education: qualification, allocation, and socialization. While this trade-off may not immediately come to mind to policy makers, they work with this trade-off implicitly. For example, governments have been mostly concerned with education for the market, so that the focus is on optimizing qualification and allocation. But are governments implicitly willing to sacrifice democratic equality in order to serve the economy? Given the policy focus on education for the market, this may indeed have been the case, without policy makers realizing it. It is therefore important that policy makers oversee the ‘whole package’ when they develop their policies and educational systems.



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