**Task 3** *(Report – word limit 600 words)* **(AC 3.1)**

*Evaluate how 2 sociological theories from this unit can be used to begin to understand an ongoing type of social inequality such as racial, gender, sexuality, class or health (such as disabilities and issues from COVID) and evaluate sociological explanations on how these inequalities exist.*

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Poor Children, poor parents, Poor results.

*A Level results are the lowest they’ve been in 4 years. With rising gaps in attainment, is it no wonder that children feel apathetic towards their future?*

Ben white, 20th October 2023

Poor children will undeniably have worse outcomes in health, education and career outcomes compared to their wealthier counterparts. A study by Villadsen *et al.* (2023) shows that the poorest adolescents are nearly 13% more likely to have issues relating to psychological distress, obesity, poor academic achievement, poor health and smoking. Childhood poverty is returning to rates unseen since the mid 90’s (Handscombe, 2021), with children in lone parent families and from ethnic minority groups most likely to live in poverty (Child Poverty Action Group, 2023). But an uncomfortable argument still rages at the core of this issue; does the responsibility for these differences lie with the individual or the system?

The theories of functionalist sociologist Talcott Parsons can potentially be used to understand this gap in attainment. Parsons believed that school as an agency of socialisation is used to bridge the gap between the particularistic values of a child’s family and the universal values of society (Tutor2u, 2019a). These norms and values are split between the formal and hidden curriculum - what is expressly taught (mathematics, biology) and what is not (punctuality, respect for authority). An important role of the hidden curriculum is that it teaches meritocracy, that society rewards people based on effort and ability. Functionalists like Parsons would explain that these gaps in attainment are not due to an impoverished background but that these schools fail to properly teach the hidden curriculum, leading to children who do not put in the effort to learn and succeed.

However, it might not be as straight forward as this theory makes it appear. Many students do in fact ‘succeed’ in learning the hidden curriculum, yet go on to have low paying jobs like retail management or childcare. Furthermore, as stated above, there is evidence that coming from a wealthy background has an impact on a child’s attainment. If state schools are failing to teach the hidden curriculum, then government regulators such as OFSTED should step in and ensure that the system remains meritocratic. But there may be a more sinister reason for the attainment gap.

Marxist theorists Bowles and Gintis (Tutor2u, 2019b) believe the school system is used to prepare working class children for exploitation under bourgeois dominance. To them the idea of a meritocracy is a myth and instead only seeks to reproduce social inequality. The structure of the school system helps to achieve this with clear hierarchies in place and strict punishments for disobedience. In contrast to this, upper class children are taught in private schools where they are taught confidence in themselves and how to dominate others. Thus, the hidden curriculum creates docile and complacent workers for the bourgeois class to exploit and control, while ensuring that the children of bourgeois families remain bourgeois.

Many are prone to criticise this view as its not as if working class students today seem docile or easy to control. But, in *Learning to Labour* (Willis, 2000) Neo-Marxist thinker Paul Willis argues that this poor behaviour can only benefit the capitalist system.

In a study of 12 working class, white British boys, Willis used a combination of covert and overt investigation in order to understand their behaviour. Their ‘counter school culture’ was an act of rebellion against school rules and sought to disrupt regular school life. The boys smoked, remarked sexist and homophobic view, and valued manual work over mental labour, seeing it as more appropriate for real men. Willis argues that this rejection of school authority lead to their own ‘self-damnation’, as it lead to their acceptance of lower paid, manual labour. Furthermore, the culture they created acted as a ‘conscious bridge’ between itself and the culture of a typical manual work environment for the 1970’s.

It is clear that there exist many social hurdles towards reducing the attainment gap within schools today. It is clear that individualistic approaches in explaining social inequality are lacking in evidence and cohesion compared to views which examine how society can reinforce and exacerbate it.

Word Count: 660

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