

COLÁISTE NÁISIÚNTA EALAÍNE IS DEARADH
NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN
A Recognised College of the University College Dublin
FACULTY OF EDUCATION

Name of Student: Jasmine Carroll

Course: BA1 Joint Honours in Education and Fine Art/Design

Submission Date: 6th December 2022

Lecturer/tutor: Andrew Wall

Essay/Assignment Title: Excuse Me, Miss, What Is The Point of This?

Word-count: 2600

Criteria	Ex	VG	Good	Fair	Poor	Comment
Introduction (statement of problem, response to task)						
Range and use of appropriate sources						
Development of argument (analysis, interpretation)						
Conclusions (application, findings, outcomes)						
Presentation, language, academic conventions						

General comment:

Indicative grade:

Tutor: _____

Date: _____

Copy of this sheet must accompany all written.

“Excuse Me, Miss, What Is The Point of This?”

Jasmine Carroll

22372993

This essay is submitted in partial fulfilment of the PME 1st Year.

Table of Contents

[Introduction](#)

[Theme](#)

[Theme Applied](#)

[Personal Reflection](#)

[Conclusion](#)

[Reference List](#)



Introduction

The image I have chosen for this assignment illustrates the concept of despair, depicting a student surrounded by relevant lesson material which may be of limited use to him in his future profession. I selected this image as my visual stimulus as I think it accurately portrays the modern function of secondary education as it is currently organized in Ireland.

From my own second-level education experience, I recall sitting in class and counting down the minutes until my next depleting lesson. A question commonly posed was, “Excuse me, Miss, what is the point of this?”. Calculus, poetry and formal writing in Irish - examples of skills I haven’t used since I graduated from second-level education and will rarely need to use again for my chosen profession. So why must they consume so much time and effort?

In this essay, I will discuss the themes of the New Right Economic Theory and Conflict Theory. I plan to critique the mechanical nature of schooling through my stated theories. Schools nowadays are run like factories in which higher paid, economically more important careers are encouraged, while arts-based careers are discouraged. I will be using theories such as George Ritzer’s ‘McDonaldization’ theory (1993) and Bowles and Gintis’ ‘Human Capital’ theory (1975) to further my argument.

According to Hayes (2022), “Economic Sociology is a branch of sociology that studies economic phenomena”. This stems from 16th Century Capitalist authors such as Adam Smith, who in his book, ‘The Wealth of Nations’, devised that if you were interested in something, you could make a career out of it and share the money equally amongst those in society. However, this developed into a model in which 99% of people work and the other 1% enjoy the profits of the majority. The New Right Economic Theory is associated with conservative, right-wing governments and maintains that all elements of society should centre around the economy (Wall, 2022). This theory has taken over learning policies in higher education since the 1980s and argues that the sole purpose of education is to acquire jobs, serve the economy and produce as much capital as possible. Instead of teaching us to produce products for the economy, we are the products produced for the economy.

The subsequent theory I will be discussing, Conflict Theory, tells us of the conflict created in society, as Hayes (2022) details, “Society is in a state of perpetual conflict because of competition for limited resources”. In essence, economic forces control society so the rich become richer and the poor become poorer (Wall, 2022). Concerning the education system, Conflict Theory determines how those in power maintain their status. This theory derives from 19th Century theorist Karl Marx’s concept of Communism, in which a flawless society must remove social and financial barriers to create equality amongst all (Wall, 2022). To liberate the lower class, Marx believed that the government would have to regulate all means of production so no one would better anyone else by retaining more profit. In theory, this was a great idea which would solve issues such as race and class. However, it has failed every time it has been sampled for a variety of reasons. For example, Russia pushed Communism during the 20th Century, resulting in the formation and subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union.

Theme

In relation to education and schooling, the young Karl Marx believed that “without education, the working class was condemned to lives of drudgery and death, but that with education they had a chance to create a better life.” (Kellner, 2006). Marx’s Conflict Theory has been used to critique the education system and encouraged the thinking about the transformation of capitalist societies into socialist ones.

In 1993, American sociologist George Ritzer devised a theory about how our society works economically, which he called ‘McDonaldization’. He defined this as “the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world.” (Ritzer, 1993). McDonald’s is the largest fast-food chain in the world who sell billions of dollars through international success. When we put it like this, it’s quite clear to see that McDonald’s is more than just a Happy Meal. A company receives many

economical advantages when applying this model. A wider choice of goods and services is offered to a much larger population proportion. It's also more appealing than customised goods or services with a higher price point to those with a lower disposable income. However, this model can tend to become dehumanising. Customers lining up and waiting for workers to prepare goods or services can often feel like a factory assembly line. The model of 'McDonaldization' theory is directly linked to schooling. This model is very prevalent in education systems around the world. Evidence of this claim has been clearly demonstrated in student lead learning, in which the teacher facilitates the learning information. Students are then encouraged to learn through group work, therefore become responsible for their learning. This echoes McDonald's way in which the consumer orders their food, collects it, chooses a table and then clears it (Najafi, 2015). In regards to the menu, McDonald's is always changing it to maximize profit by giving the customers what they want (Dale, 1994). The education system mirrors this by adding new subjects to the curriculum that students can choose for their exams. Both these examples show how factory-like natures can be applied to schooling.

'Human Capital' theory argues that "schools prepare people for adult work rules by socializing people to function well and without complaint in the hierarchical structure of the modern corporation" (Bowles and Gintis, 2002). The education system achieves this by setting up social interactions and individual honours to prepare us for the adult workplace environment. Bowles, S. and Gintis, H. researched Conflict Theory and The New Right Economic Theory to formulate the 'Human Capital' Theory. The years 1890-1930 gave rise to Progressivism in the education system which brought many educational developments such as student council and school athletics to the American education system. This movement was not only designed by, but welcomed by capitalist predators and benefactors such as businessmen and 'good government groups'. This theory was further fueled by the Vocational Education Movement. The Chicago Federation of Labour claimed that "vocationalism would have the effect of channeling working class, immigrant, and black children into manual jobs" (Bowles and Gintis, 1976). Training was offered to those looking to join the labour force with better understanding to set them apart from other production workers. These mechanical attitudes and expectations have become a universal understanding. These previous two points can be related to my next argument which issues the Irish education system.

The Irish educational system of today is heavily flawed and these mechanical ideas are a dominating factor. "The school system today reinforces and legitimates economic inequality and severely limits the full development of human potentialities" (Field, 1977). Ireland's recession in 2008 had drastic outcomes for our country's economy. It resulted in falls in construction and mass bankruptcy due to the massively high and unattainable price of mortgages. Fears of a second recession in 2022 were sparked after skyrocketing inflation rates. This leads to certainty that the Irish schooling must be based on a capitalist education system due to fears of economic

failure. At the start of 2011, a report by Dr Colin Hunt was published, outlining the nationwide strategy of Higher Education. This report emphasized the significance of third-level education for the economy. “Universities must not only produce suitable graduates for the economy, but must also become profit-making economic entities.” (Holborow, 2012). The thought was brought forward that graduates are required to fill skills shortages in the economy. These favourably skilled, generously paid jobs will bring immense advancements to the Irish standard of living. Interestingly enough, the report barely mentioned unemployment and emigration amongst Irish graduates. Little was also mentioned about the effects that the 2008 recession would have on the increasing number of graduating students. The Irish economy has done all they can to cut costs on spending. Regarding ‘McDonaldization’ theory in the Irish education system, third-level educational institutes such as universities favour teaching assistants due to their enthusiasm and ability to be paid a cheaper wage. Labour exploitation in McDonalds favours cheap, young and enthusiastic staff for work (Najafi, 2015). Student nurses are required to undertake unpaid ‘placement’ under brutal conditions for their nursing degree. Lecture halls are packed with more college students than seats, just so educational institutions can educate the students of Ireland on a cheaper budget. In the Leaving Certificate, schooling pushes certain subjects such as S.T.E.M. subjects to maximise economic profit, rather than the more arts-based subjects. Questions should be raised about the inequality of the treatment of subjects and the blatant labour exploitation covered up as placement.

Serious changes need to be made to the Irish education system. The idea of pushing capitalist ideas of the education system is already proving to be a dangerous one. “A school system that teaches all children well without labelling the white, or the rich, or the male, or the American as more deserving of subsequent economic privilege is an essential component” (Bowles and Gintis, 2003). If the Irish education system keeps pushing the higher-paid, maximum-profit careers, then soon enough graduates will find themselves either working below their abilities or being oversupplied which may lead to unemployment. Students should have an education system which has the intention of pushing students to their full potential rather than pushing them to become products for the economy. Opinions can also be changed through the power of the people fighting injustice. Educational researcher Wayne Au details that he worked with less privileged students; “In retrospectively Freirian terms, I was witnessing how curriculum could help students feel like the subjects of their own lives, and not merely objects being acted upon by outside forces” (Au, 2015). The education system does not have to be restricting but liberating. By acting together to make students’ voices heard, injustice can be fought and liberation can be felt. “These kinds of protests allowed me to glimpse what moments of what it meant to feel free in some sense” (Au, 2015).



Theme Applied

The student in this image conveys a helpless, stressful tone. He is seated in a library and is surrounded by a considerable amount of books with course material. He is holding his head in concentration, attempting to grasp the learning material he is expected to recite at any given instant. In his head, he knows that the learning material isn't of much use to him in his chosen profession. The student has no choice but to memorize material for his final Leaving Cert exam which will determine whether or not he will be able to pursue his dream profession.

Building upon the literature which has been discussed so far, the image which I have chosen accurately reflects the problem at hand with Ritzer's 'McDonaldization' theory applied to the education system. This is noticed through the consumption of goods or participation in services that occur outside of places from the original 'point of sale'. "Eating used to be a form of socialization, but now it is an experience in isolation" (Najafi, 2015). Many people nowadays receive their McDonalds orders through the drive-through or delivery service. They eat their meal at home or in their car, away from the original point of purchase. We can apply this to the image of this student above. They are in isolation and are teaching themselves course material outside of its original 'point of sale'; the classroom. The image challenges the viewer to question how Irish schools came to be modelled after a fast food company.

The influence of Bowles and Gintis' 'Human Capital Theory' can also be linked to this image. This student is working hard to receive an individual honour to prepare himself to be accepted into his future workplace environment. Unfortunately for this student, his aspiration to work in construction is a discouraged profession by capitalist predators. This student would be more suited to a vocational trade skills education that the Vocational Education Movement would have offered in 1890s America (Bowles and Gintis, 1976). He would learn a skill set better suited to what profession he dreams of pursuing and it would set him apart from other less-skilled workers.

Personal Reflection

Our older generations have plagued us with the phrase “School days are the best days of your life”, but are they? We are put through so much unnecessary anxiety, pressure and hardship to sit one final memory test which determines what mechanical tools we can or can’t be for the benefit of the economy. So many young students today have no idea what career they want to pursue in their adult life due to how restricting the education system is for the sake of the creation of maximum capital.

As a high achiever throughout my educational studies, I was discouraged from pursuing my dream career of becoming an art teacher. I had the opportunity to study any course available in this country but opted for creating my portfolio for art college, much to my guidance counselors dismay. I was required to comprehend the most mind-numbing topics. I was in no way inspired or encouraged to further study a subject I studied for my Leaving Certificate in third-level education apart from art. I grew to despise many subjects from the course material and nagging teachers. As someone who spent many childhood summer holidays and skiing trips in February mid-term break in France, I personally took French as a Leaving Cert subject but was deferred from studying it at third-level education due to the heavy learning material. For my exam, I had a better understanding of writing a review rather than holding a simple conversation. I also grew up learning to play the piano, a skill I regretfully no longer practice due to my Junior Certificate practical exam and the constant drilling of perfecting the four required songs for my practical exam. Having left school, I can now see the expectations to exploit students through ‘Human Capital’ theory to become products for the economy, as I myself was one that was pushed to follow those norms of becoming something more like a brain surgeon than an art teacher.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have discussed Conflict Theory and The New Right Economic Theory concerning Ritzer’s ‘McDonaldization’ theory and Bowles and Gintis’ ‘Human Capital’ theory. I have shown how these theories connect to the Irish education system, how these systems were designed and what needs to be done about them. I have linked these theories to my chosen image and explained their relevance before providing my critique and personal experience.

The reform of the education system is vital. Schooling determines who will teach and lead the next generation. How are we to maintain individuality, imagination and personality if we are to conform to idealistic standards set to work for the economy efficiently? In years to come, I hope that my chosen image will not be representative of the education system. I hope our children will not have to go through the Leaving Certificate we did. They will not have to deteriorate their mental health and waste their early years trying to merge into the capitalist society that surrounds us just so our

country can dig its way out of a collapse of the economy. Most of all, I hope students will not need to ask the everyday question of “Excuse me, Miss, what is the point of this?”.

Reference List

Au, W. (2015). *Just What the Hell Is A Neo-Marxist Anyway?* in Porfilio, B.J. & Ford, D.R. (Eds.) (2015) *Leaders in critical pedagogy: Narratives for understanding and solidarity*. Springer. (p.17, 22, 23)

Bowles, S. & Gintis, H. (1976). *Schooling in Capitalist America, Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life*. New York: Basic Books. (p.180, 190, 192, 193)

Bowles, S. & Gintis, H. (2002). *Schooling in capitalist America revisited*. Sociology of education. (p.3, 7)

Bowles, S. & Gintis, H. (2003). *Schooling in Capitalist America Twenty-Five Years Later*. Sociological Forum. (p.345)

Dale, R. (1994). The McDonaldisation of Schooling and the Street-level Bureaucrat. *Curriculum Studies*. (p.253).

Field, A.J. (1977). *Review of Schooling in Capitalist America by S. Bowles & H. Gintis*. (p.275)

Hayes, A. (2022). *Conflict theory definition, founder, and examples*, Investopedia. Retrieved from: <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/c/conflict-theory.asp> (Accessed: November 7, 2022).

Hayes, A. (2022). *Economic sociology definition*, Investopedia. Retrieved from: <https://www.investopedia.com/economic-sociology-5248697> (Accessed: November 7, 2022).

Kellner, D. (2006). *Marxian perspectives on educational philosophy: From classical Marxism to critical pedagogy*. University of Los Angeles, California. (p. 2).

Holborow, M. (2012). Neoliberalism, human capital and the skills agenda in higher education - the Irish Case. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*. (p.94, 95, 96, 97)

Najafi, H. (2015). McDonaldisation Society and Education. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*. (p.213, 214).

Ritzer, G. (1993). *The McDonaldization of society* Pine Forge Press. (p.7, 19, 20).

Wall, A. (2022). *Sociology of Education, Topic 2: Thinking Socially About Education* [Lecture Powerpoint Slides]. Retrieved from:
<https://ncad.instructure.com/courses/280/files/11204?verifier=P1Gldm0nkBEmHEpaxlONVp0tC5FpGrb18IxqK01n&wrap=1>