ITEM B: FUNCTIONALISM AND EDUCATION

Functionalists are particularly interested in the role of education in society. They see one key function of education as being secondary socialisation: teaching children the norms and values of wider society.

However, other sociologists, such as Marxists, argue that functionalists ignore the negative effects of education for some and that education might not work in the interests of the whole of society, but just of some powerful groups.

Applying material from Item B and your knowledge, evaluate the usefulness of functionalist views of the education system in society today. (30 marks)

Functionalists are structuralist sociologists who are influenced by the ideas of Emile Durkheim. Durkheim believed that society was made up of institutions – like the family, religion and the education system – that each have useful functions to help society work effectively.

Functionalism is described as a consensus theory as central to its analysis is the idea that there is a broad consensus about norms and values and how society should work. They believe that the education system has important functions for society, such as secondary socialisation and role allocation. However, other sociologists, such as Marxists and feminists, argue that institutions like the education system do not function in the interests of the whole of society, but only for powerful groups in society.

Post-modernists would suggest that functionalist theories are no longer relevant to today’s society.

Functionalists identify three key functions that education performs for society. The first of these, as mentioned in Item B, is secondary socialisation. Primary socialisation refers to the way in which young children learn how to behave in society from their parents. Secondary socialisation is when they develop from the particular norms and values of their own family to the broader ones of society as a whole. This happens through various institutions, such as the media and religious institutions and, most importantly for this discussion, in school. By passing on a set of norms and values, Durkheim argues that social cohesion and social solidarity is achieved as there is a value consensus. We all believe the same things. This happens through both the formal curriculum and the hidden curriculum. So we learn a shared body of knowledge, but also how to behave and to accept authority.

A clear introduction which outlines the debate and which clearly defines key concepts from the question and addresses all aspects of the question.

This paragraph makes direct reference to Item B and introduces a relevant sociological theory in some detail.

There is evaluation within the paragraph and links to the education system today.

Marxists would suggest that this does not provide a shared...
set of values for the good of society, but instead indoctrinates the children of the working class with the ideas of the ruling class and teaches them to accept a life of being exploited. Feminists would make a similar argument except instead of education instilling bourgeois values, they would argue that it instils patriarchal values. Post-modernists would suggest that all three of these ‘grand narratives’ are outdated and that the education system today reflects a diverse society. There is not a value consensus because people attend a wide range of different schools and educational establishments that might have very different values, including schools associated with different religious faiths. However, the recent policy of ensuring all schools in the UK focus on British values can be seen as following the functionalist idea of promoting social cohesion through a value consensus. As such, it could be argued that the functionalist idea of schools promoting social cohesion through secondary socialisation is useful for understanding some aspects of today’s education system.

The second key function of education identified by functionalists is role allocation: the idea that the education system sifts and sorts people into the most appropriate jobs when they leave school. Talcott Parsons argues that this happens in a meritocratic way. In other words, the most academically able, or those who put in the most effort, will get to the top. People who will attain the jobs that get the best rewards are those more able to perform them. Parsons argues that this happens because people have equal opportunities in modern Western education systems. A fair process of assessment determines who gets the high grades and gains access to further study and professional occupations. Davis and Moore add to this by arguing that the system of unequal rewards – jobs that require higher level education being paid much better than those that do not, for example – incentivises people to put in the necessary effort. Marxists would dismiss this idea, saying that meritocracy is a myth. They argue that the appearance of meritocracy or equality of opportunity is an essential part of the ideology that produces a false consciousness. People have to believe that there is a chance that they could be socially mobile or they wouldn’t learn the necessary skills to be exploited as proletarians in capitalist workplaces. While this shows that functionalism contributes to a useful debate about the role of education in the stratification of society, post-modernists would question the relevance of both functionalist and Marxist theories to society today, arguing that today’s society and
workplace do not resemble either the meritocratic or exploitative stratification they describe. Instead, society is complex and diverse. Levels of graduate unemployment and underemployment show that educational success is no longer a passport to high rewards. Similarly, some who left education early or performed poorly have gone on to great financial success either through entrepreneurialism or through success in sport, entertainment or ‘celebrity’.

The final key function for education, according to functionalists, is teaching people the skills they will need for the good of the economy. A number of changes in education policy over the years has been designed to ensure that the education system produces people with the skills that the economy actually requires. This has led to developments in vocational education, a huge expansion of university education, a new generation of apprenticeships and an increased emphasis on both computer programming and literacy and numeracy. However, some would point out that a great deal of the school curriculum is not especially useful for most jobs. Actually, apart from some specific vocational qualifications and apprenticeships, there is very little work skills training within formal schooling and most people will not use Shakespeare, algebra or knowledge of the Second World War in their working lives.

There are a number of criticisms of functionalist views of education. First, many areas of society are still dominated by wealthy elites who went to the same public schools and universities. They are not where they are because they are especially clever or hardworking but entirely because of who they know and the connections they have, through family, school or university. Furthermore, there is a lot of evidence of differential achievement in education, particularly in terms of social class and ethnicity: this suggests that the education system is not meritocratic but is instead rigged against some groups in society and very much in the favour of others (whether deliberately or not is a matter of sociological debate).

Furthermore, if the education system is supposed to be training people to perform the roles that the economy requires of them, it appears – in some respects at least – to be failing. There are recruitment crises in some occupations, insufficient graduates in some subject areas (especially science and engineering) and many jobs, both at the top and the bottom of the income scale, are filled by workers taught and trained in other countries. If UK
schools are not producing sufficient top bankers or doctors or builders and fruit pickers and instead they need to be imported from other countries, does this undermine the idea that the education system provides this function? Some would say that this is a feature of globalisation and an increasingly global economy rather than a failing of the education system in functionalist terms. However, it again questions the extent to which the theory is relevant to society today, even if it might have helped our understanding of society in the mid twentieth century.

In conclusion, functionalists raise the important question of the role of education in society and as such their ideas are of great use to sociologists of education. However, many of their ideas are open to challenge and some seem somewhat outdated and not relevant to society today.

[1238 words]

Examiner style comments: *Mark band 25–30*

This is a top mark band essay. It demonstrates a strong evaluative argument in response to the question and uses supporting sociological evidence well. In these sorts of questions, the word ‘today’ will be used as a discriminator by the examiners (in other words, certain mark bands will be unavailable if the essay is left ‘timeless’) – this aspect of the question is well addressed here.

Sociological theory is clearly communicated and understood and there is a good range of knowledge which has been analysed in response to the demands of the question. A good range of sociological studies and key terminology is used.
ITEM B: AN EDUCATION MARKET

Some sociologists argue that education policy inspired by New Right ideas has been primarily concerned with creating a market in the education system, where schools compete to attract parents and pupils.

However, there are several education policies that do not contribute to this marketisation, such as the Pupil Premium, a Liberal Democrat policy introduced by the coalition government, that meant children from low income households brought with them additional funding for a school which must be spent in ways that benefit disadvantaged pupils.

Applying material from Item B and your knowledge, evaluate the view that the main purpose of recent education policy has been to create an education market. (30 marks)

New Right politicians believe that market forces improve efficiency and quality; that competition improves standards. As such, politicians inspired by such ideas (mostly, but not exclusively, from the Conservative Party) have implemented policies that have promoted competition between schools and other educational institutions and that seeks to create a market in education. A great deal of education policy, especially since 1988, can be seen as part of that project. However, some ‘marketisation’ policies had other purposes and governments have also introduced policies that were primarily designed to address inequality, serve the needs of the economy, to influence the norms and values of society.

According to Item B, marketisation policies are those that promote parental choice and competition between schools. The 1988 Education Reform Act was the most far-reaching piece of educational legislation since 1944 and could be seen as being almost entirely designed to create an education market. First, parents were given significantly more choice over which schools they could send their children to. Then school funding was calculated per pupil. For this reason it was necessary for schools to attract as many pupils as possible while schools they could send their children to. Then school funding was calculated per pupil. In order for parents to make fair and informed choices about which school to choose, a number of new initiatives were introduced. The National Curriculum ensured that pupils everywhere were learning the same subject content. Then SATs exams, together with league tables, enabled parents to compare schools and decide which school was best. The new OFSTED provided further information with their regular inspection reports. Critics of
these policies argued that they provided parents with limited information (just tests results, rather than information about issues like support for special educational needs). They also argued that schools that got the best results were often the more middle class schools that then got the best funding, while poorer, tougher schools were underfunded, leading to a vicious circle. They also pointed out that middle class parents often had the knowledge, time and resources to ‘play the system’. The policies were designed to create an education market, but whether they were successful in doing so, and whether that market improved standards and quality, is a matter of debate.

While these policies did create a market in education, there were other purposes for some of these policies. The National Curriculum, as well as permitting comparisons, gave central government more control over what was taught. Marxists would see this as the state ensuring its control over the spreading of bourgeois ideology (removing control from local authorities that sometimes had radical left-wing politics) while functionalists would look at this more favourably, seeing a national curriculum as promoting social cohesion and shared norms and values. There was also the practical function of making it less disruptive for pupils to change schools. OFSTED clearly existed to police educational quality, not just to inform parents, and SATs allowed progress to be measured. Other policies within the 1988 act, like changing O-Levels into GCSEs, do not appear to have had much to do with marketisation.

When Labour came into power in 1997, one might have expected marketisation to have been less of a feature of educational policy, but New Right ideas remained influential within New Labour. One feature of the 1988 Education Reform Act had been the creation of grant maintained schools – schools independent of local authority control. While one function of this was to further reduce the influence of local government (that was sometimes hostile to the Conservative government), it was also seen as part of a marketisation agenda as the schools became increasingly like private businesses, even though they were funded by government. The Labour government developed academy schools which really expanded on this idea. While Labour primarily looked at giving failing and struggling schools academy status, when the Conservatives returned to power they encouraged all schools to develop into academies and many secondary schools and many primary
schools now are. They also introduced free schools. These were brand new schools, funded in the same way as academies. However, because academies and free schools don’t have to follow the national curriculum, this development has – ironically – removed one of the key aspects of 1988’s marketisation programme.

The Labour government also began to introduce some market principles into higher education by introducing tuition fees. While the purpose of the policy, at least initially, was to increase funding for higher education rather than to create a market, once universities could charge different fees (up to £3000 per year under Labour) then an element of market forces existed, although most immediately charged the full amount. When the coalition government trebled tuition fees to £9000 per year there was a little more variability between institutions, with some choosing to market courses at lower rate to attract more students (and therefore more money). However, most still chose to charge the maximum amount (to put pressure on the government to lift the cap on fees) and therefore one could argue that this was quite a limited market.

However, plenty of recent education policies have purposes other than marketisation. A number of policies were designed to tackle inequality, and the Labour government introduced Surestart centres, an early childhood education policy, to try to reduce the social class attainment gap in early years. They also introduced the educational maintenance allowance (EMA) to encourage working class pupils to remain in education after 16 and the Aim Higher organisation to encourage working class pupils to apply to university. Eventually (after initially abolishing them!) the Labour government restored student grants for university students from low income backgrounds. As mentioned in Item B, the coalition government introduced the pupil premium that directly interfered with the education market, as imagined in 1988, making children from low income households worth more money to the schools. This could be seen in terms of fixing a flaw with the education market. Currently, the Conservative government under Theresa May is seeking to reintroduce grammar schools. This controversial policy is defended by its supporters as aiding social mobility through equal opportunities: a meritocratic policy. Therefore, there are clear recent policies that were not in place to create a market in education.

Other policies have other purposes, still not relating to...
creating an education market. The proposed development of T-Levels – a new generation of vocational qualifications – is designed to train workers for the roles needed in the economy. The prominence of literacy and numeracy skills in education, especially alongside vocational qualifications, can be seen as part of the same project. The requirement for all schools to emphasise British values is designed to affect the norms and values of society and promote social cohesion. Again, these policies show that education policy has not focused exclusively on marketisation in recent years.

In conclusion, it is clear that there has been a lot of education policy aimed at creating a market in education and this was not restricted just to the New Right inspired 1988 Act. However, other purposes of education policy such as serving the needs of the economy, promoting equality and socialisation have been clearly present too. As such, it is not accurate to say that creating an education market has been the main purpose of recent education policy.

[1210 words]

Examiner style comments: **Mark band 25–30**

This is a top mark band essay. It demonstrates a strong evaluative argument in response to the question and uses supporting sociological evidence well. It includes a lot of relevant policy detail all explicitly linked back to the question, including current policies.

Sociological theory is clearly communicated and understood and linked to policy, and there is a good range of knowledge which has been analysed in response to the demands of the question. A good range of key terminology and key concepts is used.