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Inequality in Education

Chapter Outline

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- 3.2 Educational Inequality in the U.S. Public School System
- 3.3 Impact of Economic Transition in the United States on Education
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Jamal, 18, is at a crossroads. Months before, he graduated from his neighborhood high school, which was predominantly made up of kids like him who came from black, low-income families. Jamal's grades weren't great, but at least he has the diploma. His father didn't have a high school diploma, but he was able to support his family with a union factory job for decades until the factory closed.

But Jamal is finding that things have changed since his father was his age and entered the job market. Despite months of applying for entry-level, low-paying jobs, Jamal remains unemployed. Even coffee shops are flooded with applications from people with college degrees. Jamal realizes he won't be able to compete in the job market without some college credits, but community college fees have soared. Additionally, Jamal isn't confident that his high school education prepared him for the challenges of college-level work, leaving him to wonder if he should bother to enroll in college and accrue student loan debt.

Think about what inspired you to enroll in college. How did your earlier education prepare you for your college studies? How will a college degree influence your life? How might it affect your ability to find employment? For what type of jobs will a college degree allow you to compete? How, overall, will a college degree impact your life chances?

3.1 Educational Inequality Is a Social Problem

This chapter examines the relationship between education and life chances, focusing on the social problem of unequal access to a quality education. A look through the sociological lens shows that educational inequality affects society as well as individuals. The sociological perspective further reveals a pattern of inequality that violates the core values of both American and global society, making educational inequality a major social problem with far-reaching consequences.

One area in which inequality is evident in the United States is in how schools are funded. For example, a 2011 U.S. Department of Education Report revealed that more than 40% of low-income schools across the United States receive less state and local funding than schools in higher income areas with schools of the same grade levels (Heuer & Stullich, 2011). Inequality is also reflected by educational opportunities since millions of children worldwide do not have access to primary education. While the percentage of children who do receive primary education in the developing world has risen to 89% in 2010, opportunities for education vary dramatically depending on geography. Indeed, approximately 69 million school-aged children are not enrolled in school worldwide, with 31 million of those kids living in sub-Saharan African and 18 million in Southern Asia (United Nations, 2011).

A Closer Look: Funding Inequalities Between low- and high-income schools

To learn more about funding inequities between high- and low-income schools, despite federal efforts to promote equity, watch the video “Close the Comparability Loophole” at http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2011/08/comparability_video.html. How does funding schools prevent or promote social inequality? In what ways does the comparability provision loophole promote inequality in education?

Education and Core Values

Access to quality education has long been one of the core values of the American Dream, which holds that anyone who works hard can move up social and economic ladders. Yet this idea depends on equal access to quality education for all citizens. The current state of educational inequality clearly violates this core value by failing to provide all Americans with the means to improve their economic and social status through educational attainment. As President Barack Obama noted when unveiling his blueprint for education reform in 2010, “We will not be able to keep the American promise of equal opportunity if we fail to provide a world-class education to every child” (Obama, 2010, para. 4).

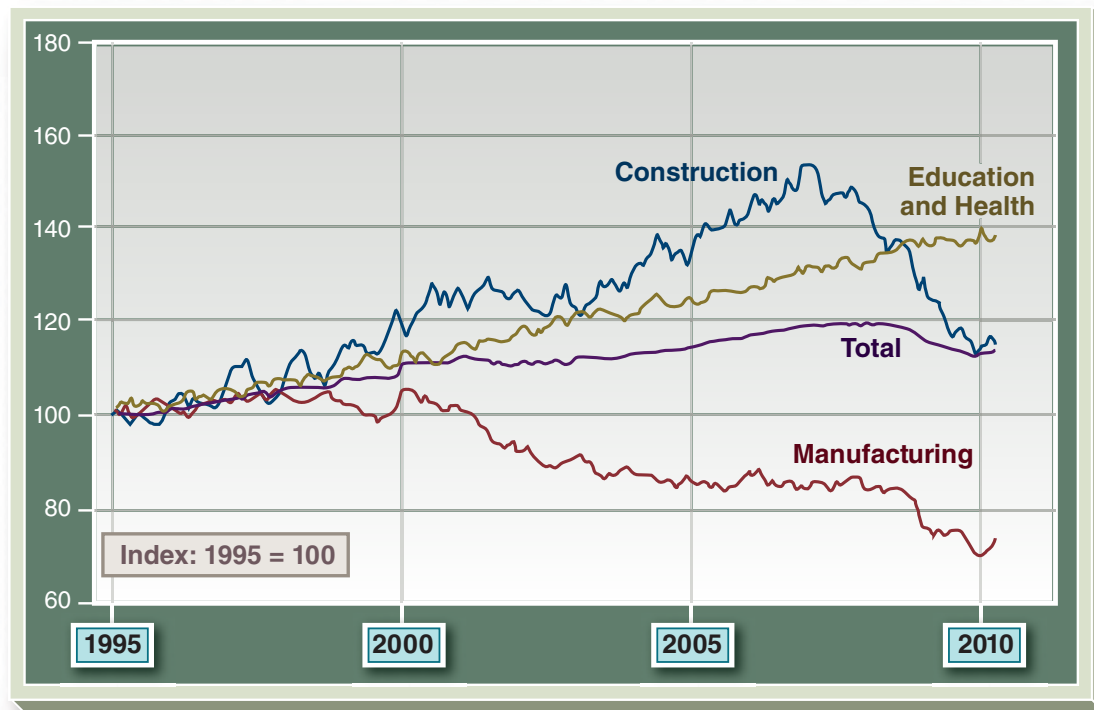
Indeed, economic and political leaders have a particular interest in ensuring educational equality remains a core value in order to promote an educated workforce that can contribute to overall economic growth. Yet business leaders complain that there aren’t enough college-educated workers. In fact, the title of a June 2010 editorial in *Bloomberg Businessweek* magazine proclaimed, “Failing U.S. Education Will Dumb Down Economic Growth” (Farrell, 2010), reflecting the opinion that the U.S. economy will not be able to grow if there is a mismatch between the number of college-educated workers needed and those available in the workforce. Figure 3.1 shows that jobs requiring at least some college, such as in education and health careers are growing, while availability of jobs that do not require college degrees is declining.



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Creating a strong workforce depends upon providing all Americans with access to a quality education.

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Figure 3.1: Employment trends by industry

People trained for jobs needed in the largely service-based U.S. economy, such as in education and health care, will have the easiest time finding employment as manufacturing and construction jobs decline.

Maury Aaseng

Source: Based on data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Education and Employment

Society generally agrees that an educated citizenry provides the skills and brainpower a nation needs in an increasingly competitive global economy. However, according to a National Governors Association report from 2008, the U.S. educational system has fallen behind and no longer exceeds or even keeps pace with many other nations. A 2011 Pew Research poll further reveals that just 19% of college presidents believe the U.S. system of higher education is the finest in the world, and only 7% of college presidents think the U.S. higher education system will be the best in the world a decade from now (2011b).

Educational attainment is clearly tied to employment, and over the past 4 decades, it has become even more crucial. For example, in 1973, 72% of the U.S. workforce was composed of people with a high school education or less—people like Jamal’s father. Manufacturing was still an important part of the U.S. economy, making it possible for those without any college education to earn middle-class wages. By 2007, however, workers with a high school education or less had shrunk to 42% of the workforce, meaning that jobs requiring some post-secondary education had grown to dominate the job market (Schwartz, 2011). The likelihood of being employed increases with one’s level of education, as shown in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1: Participation in workforce, 2010

Less than a high school diploma	High school graduate, no college	Some college	College graduate	Total population in workforce
46.3%	61.6%	70.5%	76.7%	66.5%

The numbers in this table refer to adult U.S. workers who are civilian (don't work for the military) and not in institutions (i.e., not imprisoned, in psychiatric institutions, or residing in homes for the aged).

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Table 593 Civilian Labor Force and Participation Rates by Educational Attainment, Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin 2000-2010 (<http://www.census.gov/compendia/statab/2012/tables/12s0593.pdf>)

Despite statistics that should compel young people to earn advanced degrees, students in the early 21st century have a low graduation rate. Though the percentage of young people *entering* college is high at 70% (within 2 years of high school graduation), only about 40% of Americans actually obtain an associate's or a bachelor's degree by their mid-20s (Schwartz, 2011). College enrollment, graduation and degree attainment—as well as gainful employment—are all dependent on primary and secondary school experiences. However, these experiences are not equal for all children who are educated within the United States public school system.

3.2 Educational Inequality in the U.S. Public School System

Educational inequality in the U.S. educational system makes attaining a college degree difficult, if not impossible, for many Americans. According to the U.S. Department of Education, the public education system was designed to “ensuring equal access” to quality education and, as President Obama has stated, “equal opportunity” for all American children (U.S. Department of Education, 2010; Obama, 2010). These goals, however, do not reflect the reality of a public education system entrenched in bureaucracy and ideas that benefits some and keeps others at a disadvantage.

Wealthier Americans tend to succeed academically at a much higher rate than poor and minority students (Buchmann, Condron, & Roscigno, 2010). According to the 2010 U.S. Census, 11% of students are educated in private K–12 schools (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010a). These children tend to come from families who can afford private school tuition as opposed to families that qualify for financial aid. Despite the mandate of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 to close the achievement gap for academic proficiency, the U.S. public education system maintains systemic inequities.

No Child Left Behind Act of 2001

The **No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)** of 2001 was created “to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards

and state academic assessments.” These goals were to be achieved through a variety of efforts including, “Closing the achievement gap between high- and low-performing children, especially the achievement gaps between minority and nonminority students, and between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers.” Unfortunately, more than a decade after passage of the Act, the achievement gap still exists and not all children have access to a high-quality education.

One achievement-gap issue NCLB set out to address was the problem of **out-of-field teachers**, or those who teach subjects in which they do not specialize (Education Trust, 2008). Poor and minority schools had a disproportionate number of out-of-field teachers. To solve this problem, NCLB mandated that all core classes be taught by “highly qualified” teachers. However, states were allowed to create their own definitions of “highly qualified,” which often include teachers who specialize in other subjects. (Education Trust, 2008). Therefore, the problem of out-of-field teachers persists.

Standardized test scores indicate that overall students in the United States are not as academically prepared as those in other developed nations and that they are less likely to earn high school and college degrees. In recent standardized math and reading literacy tests given to 15-year-olds from Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) nations, U.S. students scored below the average (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). In 2011, the United States ranked among 34 nations as

- above average in college dropouts,
- below average in high school graduates,
- as a less attractive place to study among students from other nations, and
- as the nation with the highest college tuition costs.

Having fewer in-field, or expert, and experienced teachers in schools with impoverished and minority students are among the many factors that contribute to the achievement gaps between Hispanic and White, and Black and White students, as measured by National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tests. For example, in 2009, White students scored 26 points higher in mathematics and 24 points higher in reading on the grade 8 NAEP tests than did Hispanic students (Hemphill & Vanneman, 2011). In 2007, White students scored 31 points higher than Black students on the grade 8 NAEP math test and 26 points higher on the grade 8 reading NAEP test (Vanneman, Hamilton, Baldwin, Anderson, & Rahman, 2009).

Quality of Instruction and Support

Teacher quality is a complicated aspect of educational inequality. As already noted, a disproportionate number of disadvantaged and minority schools have high numbers of out-of-field teachers. In U.S. high schools, for example, economically disadvantaged students and students of color are approximately twice as likely as other students to be taught by out-of-field teachers. Highly trained teachers tend to have more tools to successfully adapt to the learning styles of their students and help close educational gaps among students (Montt, 2011). Economically disadvantaged schools tend to pay teachers less, resulting in many of their teachers leaving for better-paying jobs elsewhere after a few years. Therefore, these schools tend to have more inexperienced teachers than those in wealthier districts (Haycock & Hanushek, 2010). While not all experienced teachers are effective, “rookie”



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Experienced, highly trained teachers tend to have more success adapting to different learning styles and closing educational gaps between their students.

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give them an edge over other students. Families with more economic resources can provide opportunities for **shadow education**, which includes such support as tutoring, test prep, and summer programs that help prepare students for tests such as the SAT and ACT. Shadow education gives those students an advantage in the college selection process that relies, in part, on standardized test scores (Buchmann et al., 2010). Again, the influence of race and socioeconomic status are related. Relatively few African American and Hispanic students participate in shadow education and tend to score lower on standardized tests (Corbett, Hill, & St. Rose, 2008). In 2011, the average combined score on the SAT (of a possible 2,400) was 1,272 for Black students, 1,358 for Hispanic students, and 1,579 for White students (Center for Public Education, 2011). That same year, on a scale of 1–36, Black students averaged a score of 17 on the ACT, while the average score for White students was 23.6 (Journal of Blacks in Higher Education, 2011). Hispanic students scored an average of 18.6 on the ACT in 2011 (Strauss, 2011).

teachers tend to be less effective in their first three years of teaching as they will become (if they opt to remain teachers) with more experience (Haycock & Hanushek, 2010).

Collective bargaining agreements of teacher unions can be an obstacle to transferring or removing teachers who are not effective and keeping those who are. Layoffs based on seniority and tenure can result in retaining teachers who may have more experience but are less effective.

In addition to having more experienced, in-field and effective teachers in their classrooms, students from higher income families also have the means to seek educational opportunities outside of school that

The Challenge of Accurately Measuring Graduation Rates

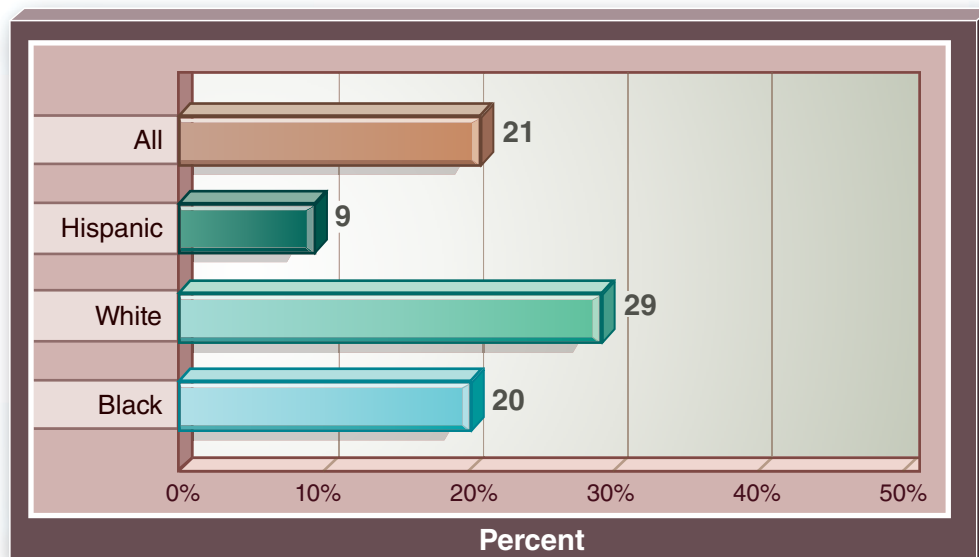
Since states use different measures to establish dropout rates, it has been difficult to determine exact graduation rates. To address data collection inconsistencies, former Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings mandated the creation of a uniform measure for dropout counts in 2008. State governors oversaw the creation of these measures implemented during the 2010–2011 school year. As data for graduation rates becomes more accurate, experts hope the scope of the high school dropout problem will become clearer and perhaps reveal a social pattern that can be addressed. The Department of Education anticipates that the new data will result in lower reported *on-time* graduation rates, particularly among minority and economically disadvantaged students (U.S. Department of Education, 2011b).

Children from low-income and minority families are more likely than higher income, or advantaged students, to attend low-performing elementary schools. These children also

primarily attend high schools with low graduation rates and few go on to college. In fact, 41% of Hispanics and 23% of African American adults over age 20 have not received a high school diploma (Fry, 2010).

Most experts believe that approximately 30% of U.S. children never receive a high school diploma (Swanson, 2008). The latest available data reveals the national high school class of 2008 had a 71.7% graduation rate (Swanson, 2011). Moreover, most students who do not graduate high school also do not attain a GED credential by passing a General Educational Development Test (see Figure 3.2). In 2008, African American and Hispanic students who did not graduate from high school were less likely to attain a GED than Whites.

Figure 3.2: High school dropouts with a GED credential, 2008



Minority students are more likely than White students to drop out of high school and less likely than White students to attain a GED credential.

Maury Aaseng

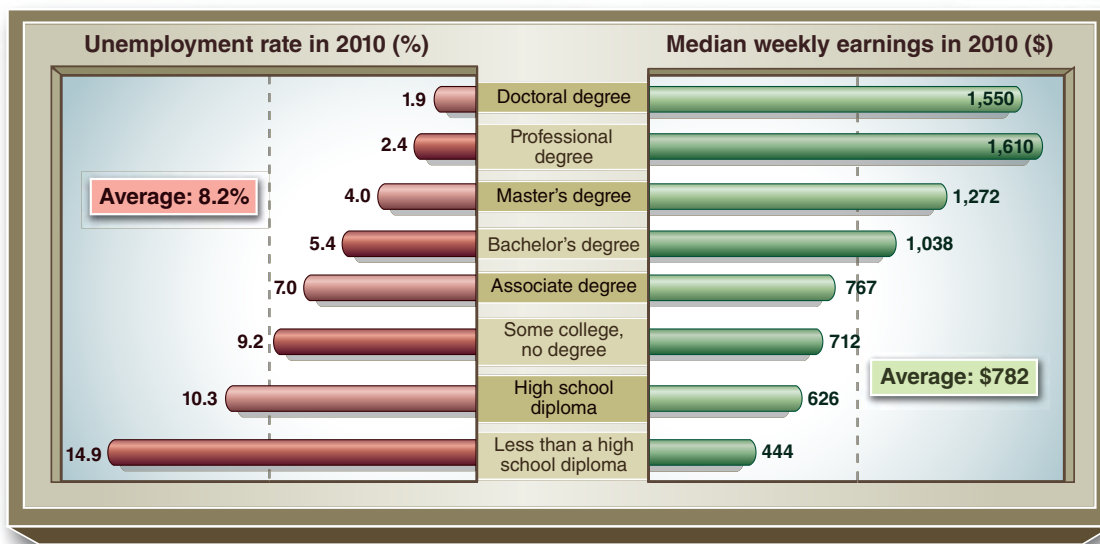
Source: Based on data taken from the Pew Hispanic Center

<http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1593/hispanic-black-white-ged-high-school-dropout-rate>

College graduation rates reflect similar inequities. While in 2010, 52% of Asian and 30% of White Americans 25 years and older had graduated from college, only 20% of African Americans and 14% of Hispanics had college degrees (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011b). Again, the racial and economic trends are related. While 80% of students from families in the top 25% of income earners earn college degrees, just fewer than 10% of students from families in the bottom 25% of income earners graduate from college (Radcliffe, 2011). The economic gap in college graduation rates has increased over the past several decades as the gap between the rich and the poor has widened (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011; Luhby, 2011). As noted in Chapter 2, inequality in economic status does much to influence the level of inequality in education.

Economically disadvantaged and minority students who do attend college face hurdles that White, wealthier students do not have to face, such as financial stress and in some cases adjusting to an upper-middle-class White campus culture (Kosut, 2008; Mompremier, 2009). While the percentage of low-income Americans of all races who enter college increased 5 percentage points between 2000 and 2008, the college graduation rate among this group remained steady. In the early 21st century, almost half of potential students in this socioeconomic group enter college, but only about 10% earn a college degree (IHEP 2010). Since educational achievement affects both income and employment, economic inequality between Black and White and Hispanic and White Americans continues to widen (see Figure 3.3).

Figure 3.3: Unemployment rates and median weekly earnings by educational attainment



One's level of education has a clear impact on employment and income potential.

Maury Aaseng

Source: Based on data taken from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Population Survey
http://www.bls.gov/emp/ep_chart_001.htm

Literacy in the United States

The ability to read and write is essential in a service-based economy such as the United States. Most jobs that pay well in such an economy require the ability to communicate effectively through the written word. Yet, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 20% of Americans are **functionally illiterate**. Those deemed functionally illiterate “cannot perform basic tasks involving printed materials,” and may have trouble “filling out a job application, using a computer, understanding written instructions, [and] reading a contract” (National Assessment of Adult Literacy [NAAL], n.d.).

Functional illiteracy diminishes the life chances of many Americans and can impact the economic growth of the nation. Recent news headlines such as “Report: Nearly Half of Detroiters

Can't Read," "Literacy Study: 1 in 7 U.S. Adults Are Unable to Read this Story," and "Graduated but Not Literate," illustrate that illiteracy is still a major social problem in the United States. It is not surprising that studies find those with higher levels of literacy are more productive members of the workforce than those with lower levels of literacy (Reder, 2010). It is also not remarkable, given the relationships among social class, race, and ethnicity, and educational inequality that African Americans and Hispanics tend to have lower literacy rates than Whites and Asians (NCES, n.d.). What *is* surprising is that even many American college graduates lack literacy skills expected of an educated citizenry—and that the percentage of college graduates with these skills has actually *decreased* over the years. According to a 2007 NCES study, less than 33% of college graduates had skills necessary to perform complex and challenging literacy activities such as comparing editorial viewpoints, while in 1992, approximately 40% of college graduates met this level of literacy proficiency (NCES, 2006). This decline is particularly sobering given the growing need for a highly trained workforce.

A Closer Look: Bruce Western—Educating Prisoners

Bruce Western, professor of sociology and director of the Malcolm Wiener Center for Social Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, has used sociological research and analysis to reveal a growing divide between educated and uneducated African Americans. The dramatic increase in imprisonment rates of young African American men without a college education since the start of the War on Drugs and mandatory sentencing in the early 1980s has led to dramatic differences in life chances among college-educated and non-college-educated young African American men. According to Western, those without a college education are uniquely disadvantaged as compared to college educated African Americans (Western, 2006). Western, along with Kaia Stern, who is project director at the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice at Harvard Law School, collaborated with Boston University's Prison Education Program and the Massachusetts Department of Correction to develop educational opportunities in prisons. Many existed in the 1980s and early 1990s, but the 1994 Crime Control and Prevention Act made prisoners ineligible for Pell grants, eliminating these opportunities. Since 2008–2009, Harvard sociology students have traveled to Massachusetts Correctional Institution (MCI) Norfolk to take classes with prisoners enrolled at Boston University (BU). All the students receive credit from BU or Harvard for the course, which examines social justice issues and potential solutions to those problems. The prison-based course, taught by college faculty, gives inmates a chance to work toward a college degree while incarcerated while exposing Harvard students to the experiences of those in prison. This is one way Western has taken action to try to heal the rift between the educated and poorly educated and to mitigate educational inequality. How do prison education programs promote literacy and thereby more successful reintegration of prisoners into society? What connections can you make between the disproportionate number of incarcerated African American males and illiteracy rates in the Black community?

3.3 Impact of Economic Transition in the United States on Education

Examining the social problem of educational inequality in the United States historically reveals that economically disadvantaged citizens, people of color, and women have not had *equal* access to quality education throughout history. This fact has been

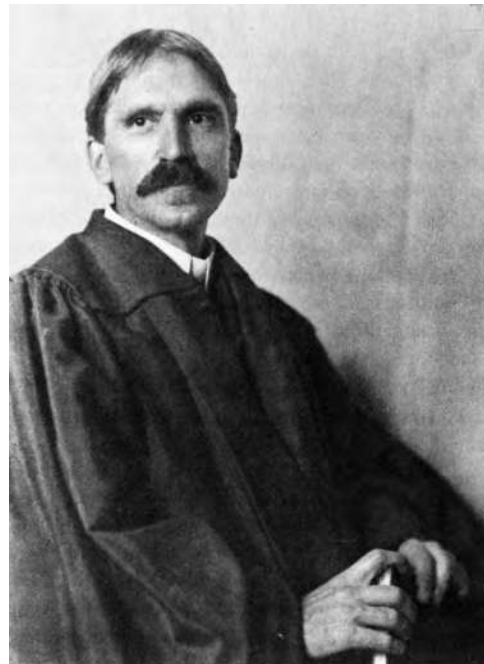
detrimental to certain groups during major transitions in American industry, including the evolution from an agriculture-based economy to a service-based one.

Since the founding of the United States, the nation's primary economy has evolved from farming to industry to, more recently, service-based. In 1790, 90% of Americans were farmers. By 1890, only 43% were farmers with an average of 136 acres per farm. However, by 1990, farmers made up just 2.6% of the population and the size of the average farm had ballooned to 461 acres. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, in 2011 fewer than 2% of Americans were farmers (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2011a).

The Industrial Revolution of the late 18th and early 19th centuries brought technological advances and industrial growth that caused increasing numbers of Americans to move from rural farms to cities to find work in factories. As immigration to the United States soared in the late 1800s and early 1900s, education became a way to "Americanize" immigrant children, and efforts to mandate education increased. By 1890, 27 states had compulsory education laws, and by 1912, school was mandatory in all of the existing 48 states and the District of Columbia.

During the late 1800s and early 1900s, education reformers such as John Dewey (1859–1952) promoted the idea that democracy and social progress can flourish only with an educated citizenry (Dewey, 1897). As a leader in the Progressive Era movement to reform government and make it more responsive to the public good, Dewey maintained that in order to thrive, a democratic society must have an informed public capable of informed dialogue with elected leaders. Dewey and other such reformers saw the mission of schools as helping students fulfill their individual potentials and influence society. Dewey was involved in the establishment of many educational institutions as founder of the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools and a cofounder of The New School for Social Research.

Dewey's ideas promoted schools as places for social reform and citizenship development, but many leaders at the primary and high school levels of education did not embrace his ideas. His influence is still felt at the college level, however. His work influenced contemporary goals for higher education, particularly the notion that education should teach young people how to take part in their own learning and effectively participate in democracy. For example, as of 2012, 1,100 college and university presidents in the United States had signed a "Campus Compact" to promote civic engagement as part of the college experience.



Eva Watson-Schütze

Education reformer John Dewey stressed that educated citizens capable of informed communication with elected leaders are necessary in order for a democratic society to thrive.



Impact of the G.I. Bill on Graduation Rates

The **Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944**, or the **G.I. Bill**, was enacted to reward soldiers who fought in World War II (1939–1945) by providing veterans with free college tuition and low-interest housing loans. The bill led to a tremendous expansion of higher education in the United States as well as growth in the economy and per capita income (Schwartz, 2011). It also did much to diminish class inequality and transform the United States into the most powerful nation in the world in the years following World War II (Central Intelligence Agency, 2012).

The dramatic growth in access to higher education due to the G.I. Bill encouraged an economic boom after World War II that led to increased income and better living standards for most Americans. Median family income doubled between 1947 and 1977, rising from \$20,102 to \$40,650 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1998). The correlation between higher education and income is still true today, with income brackets increasing along with educational levels.

Between 1910 and 1940, the percentage of Americans graduating from high school jumped from 9% to 51% (Goldin & Katz, 2003). Most working-class and disadvantaged families, however, encouraged their children to leave school before graduation to go to work full time. Relatively few jobs required a college diploma at that time, and during the Great Depression of the 1930s, few families could afford college tuition. College was primarily reserved for middle- and upper-class Americans before World War II. This changed dramatically with the passage of the G.I. Bill.

Racial and Economic Segregation in Schools

Decades after the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, in which the Supreme Court declared that racial segregation of schools was unconstitutional, U.S. schools remain segregated. Among students enrolled in public schools in 2009–2010, 55% were White, 17% Black, 21% Hispanic, 5% Asian, and 1% American Indian/Alaska Native (Aud, Hussar, Kena, Bianco, Frohlich, Kemp, & Tahan, 2011). However, the makeup of individual U.S. schools does not reflect this diversity.

Before the advances of the Civil Rights Era, school segregation was institutionalized. Today, however, racial segregation in schools is driven primarily by the fact that most students attend their neighborhood schools, where student composition depends on the local demographics. Approximately three out of every four Black and Hispanic children go to schools where students of color represent the majority of students. Nearly 40% of Black and Hispanic children attend schools where 90–100% of the students are minorities (Bhargava, Frankenberg, & Le, 2008). White students make up only 55% of the overall U.S. public school population, but most attend a school where at least 80% of their fellow students are also White. Asian American students are the most likely to attend schools with members of other races (Bhargava et al., 2008). Clearly, racial segregation persists.

As discussed in Chapter 2, and as we discuss further in Chapter 4, Hispanics, Blacks, and American Indians in the United States have higher poverty rates than do White Americans.

U.S. schools in which the majority of students are economically disadvantaged, therefore, tend to have a disproportionate number of students from racial minority groups. Racial segregation and segregation by economic class go hand in hand.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2009 and 2010, almost 22% of children lived below poverty level (U.S. Census, 2011c). In a school that is truly economically diverse, one out of every five students would live below the poverty line. However, because of preferred attendance in neighborhood schools, low-income children are either over-represented or under-represented compared to their numbers in the population as a whole. In schools in neighborhoods where 90–100% of children live in poverty, 80% of the students are Black and Hispanic. Approximately half of all Black and Hispanic children go to schools where 75% or more of students are economically disadvantaged, as opposed to only 5% of White children (Bhargava et al., 2008).

While economic segregation already exists within the public school system, some people who live in wealthier areas would like to secede from poorer school districts so that their children can attend school only with people from similar economic backgrounds. They also prefer to have their taxes excluded from supporting students from less economically advantaged areas who may need more resources to achieve the same level of academic success. These parents may also want to ensure that the schools their children attend can easily attract qualified teachers, which many less economically advantaged school districts cannot.

A Closer Look: Integrating Memphis Schools

Learn about the challenges facing educators in Memphis in their attempt to combine a suburban and predominantly White and middle-class school district with an urban, predominantly Black and poor school district. Some of the suburban towns have threatened to create their own school districts. You can find the article, “Merger of Memphis and County School Districts Revives Race and Class Challenges,” at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/06/education/merger-of-memphis-and-county-school-districts-revives-challenges.html?pagewanted=all>. Do you agree with the decision to merge the districts? Why or why not? How might your reaction differ if you were a parent of a child in the urban district versus being a parent of a child in the suburban district? If you were a parent in a suburban town, would you support efforts to secede and create a new, separate school district? Why or why not? How does your opinion reflect the goal of public schools to provide equal opportunity for all?

3.4 Theoretical Perspectives on Educational Inequality

The reasons for educational inequality are often interrelated, and to study the social patterns that make up the education gap, sociologists view this social problem from a particular perspective. Functionalism, conflict perspective, symbolic interactionism, feminism, and race-centered theoretical perspectives each focus on different causes of this social problem. Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a sort of “social map” from which to navigate the complex puzzle of educational inequality.

Functionalist Perspective

Functionalists look at the educational system from a **macro perspective**, meaning as a part of society as a whole. They examine how it interacts with other major social institutions such as family, economy, government, and religion and how it contributes to a smoothly functioning society. In other words, each institution must perform its function effectively if society is to operate without disruption.

Functionalists realize the importance of a solid educational system, and they recognize that schools must supply skilled workers who can find good jobs that will enable them to provide for their families. Further, advanced global economies *require* citizens to develop and use new technologies to compete in the global marketplace.

School systems also help students fulfill their particular roles in society. For example, in democratic societies, schools teach students how government functions and about their obligations as citizens to participate in public life. Likewise, in totalitarian societies, such as North Korea, one of the roles of schools is to teach students to revere their leader and follow his orders without question.

Functionalists recognize the importance of the educational system in teaching students to think of themselves as part of something larger than their individual selves. Emile Durkheim maintained that schools should train students to develop a set of common values that would prompt them to work for the good of society (Durkheim, 1956). Functionalists maintain that schools must socialize children to share values such as success through achievement and “equality of opportunity” (Parsons, 1959). According to functionalist theory, it is the *function* of schools to socialize students to realize that their primary obligation is to the community, and that they must do their part to maintain social order (Walford & Pickering, 1998).

There is little doubt that Durkheim would find major weaknesses in the U.S. educational system in the early 21st century. He would notice that racial and economic inequality within the system creates external inequality and is thus harmful to society. While Durkheim would support special attention and support for the most intellectually gifted students, he would also want to ensure that all students receive the training they need to contribute to society.

Conflict Perspective

Conflict theorists, like functionalists, use a macro perspective, but instead focus on structural inequities in education systems, such as funding distribution. Conflict theorists, focusing on patterns of inequality, point out that schools rely, largely, on local property taxes for funds. According to the 2011 U.S. Census, school funding is made up of 43.8% from local property taxes, 46.7% from state governments, and 9.5% from the federal government (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011d). With such a high percentage of school funds coming from property taxes, inequity is created by wealthier neighborhoods providing greater amounts in tax revenue to support their own local schools. For example, some states have chosen to divert state funds to poorer school districts while the federal government also provides supplementary funding for the most economically disadvantaged school districts. However, as noted earlier in the chapter, despite these efforts, more than 40% of low-income schools across the United States receive less state and local funding than

other, wealthier, schools teaching the same grades (Heuer & Stullich, 2011). States with the most equitable funding are Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Vermont, and Wyoming. Illinois, Louisiana, Missouri, and North Carolina provide the least equitable school funding in the United States (Baker, Sciarra, & Farrie, 2010).

Marxist conflict theorists point out that schools socialize children to support foundations of capitalism such as bureaucratic authority, obedience, and conformity (in lower- and working-class schools) and competition and motivation to achieve (in wealthier schools) (Bowles & Gintis, 1976).

As Paul Willis describes in his classic book *Learning to Labour* (1977), teaching styles may differ depending on the economic status of students. Students from wealthier families are encouraged to think independently and challenge ideas while economically disadvantaged students are taught to memorize information without thinking about or challenging its source. Willis and other Marxist conflict theorists, such as Bowles and Gintis, argue that this difference in expectations of students reinforces and perpetuates social class inequality. School systems therefore, according to Marxist conflict theory, are instruments of those in power used to maintain the unjust economic system from which they benefit. Marxists argue that unjust capitalist economic and political systems must be reformed to transform educational inequality.

Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism theorists look at educational systems from a **micro perspective**, which focuses on the smaller-scale, everyday interactions between students and their peers, families, and teachers. They note that it takes more than money to enable all students to reach their potential. Some school systems, like those in New York City and Washington, DC, spend above average amounts of money per student, according to the 2011 U.S. Census, but still struggle to raise students' level of proficiency on standardized tests.

Symbolic interactionism theorists point out that people learn how to act and where they fit into society through the process of socialization. While there are many influences affecting socialization, the five **primary socializing agents** are family, school, peers, the media, and religion. Students' interactions with teachers, parents, and peers directly impact their academic achievement. Socializing agents influence study habits, courses choices, and academic effort completed by students.

Charles Horton Cooley (1902) coined the term **looking-glass self** to describe how others affect one's self-image. Cooley argued that self-perception is based on how people *think* others see them. Therefore, his theory claimed, people's thoughts about how others view their academic potential determine their perception of their own academic ability. Students' awareness of what their parents, teachers, and peers think of them can have powerful repercussions on their academic success or failure. Think of the pupil who follows an older sibling through the same school and learns that teachers have preconceived notions about his or her capabilities.

Often, teachers' perceptions of their students are influenced by their interactions with parents. Symbolic interactionism theorists note that teachers are very aware of those parents who seek them out and play an active role in their children's education. Some parents

constantly ask about their child's progress, consult with teachers on strategies to help them learn better at home and in the classroom, and make it clear that they want teachers to focus on their child. It is understandable that those students get a larger portion of their teachers' time and attention.

Middle-class parents, socialized to assert themselves, tend to interact with their children's teachers more than parents from the lower and working classes. They are also more likely to encourage their children to speak up for themselves (Lareau, 2003). In her book *Unequal Childhoods*, Annette Lareau shows how social class influences parenting. Social class impacts a child's chance of success in school by influencing the perceptions of her teacher. Lareau notes that middle-class parents typically socialize their children through **concerted cultivation**, a style of parenting in which children are exposed to organized activities meant to foster talents and interactive social skills. These parents provide shadow schooling and other structured activities, such as lessons in music and art, in hopes of maximizing their children's academic potential.



Ariel Skelley/Getty images

Teachers' perceptions of their students are often influenced by their interactions with parents.

Through this type of socialization, children learn to expect to be heard and to be assertive and reason with adults.

Working-class parents, on the other hand, socialize their children through what Lareau describes as "the accomplishment of natural growth," giving their children fewer structured activities and attention. These children learn to entertain themselves and are less likely to complain of boredom. However, they do not learn to push themselves forward in a society that rewards confident, competitive behavior.

Feminist Perspective

Feminist theorists view educational inequality as a social problem that, while declining in some regions, persists in other areas of the globe. Women have made great strides in closing the educational gender gap in the United States. In fact, more young women than men now hold college degrees. However, disparities in educational majors between men and women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics continue to exist. In 2009, there were 2.5 million college-educated working women with degrees in those four areas, compared with 6.7 million men (Beede, Julian, Langdon, McKittrick, Khan, & Doms, 2011).

U.S. Census figures from 2007 reveal that girls were 8% more likely than boys to graduate from high school (Bernstein, 2008). Women were also more likely to finish college, with 33% of women aged 25 to 29 receiving a degree compared to 26% of men (Bernstein, 2008). On many campuses, college admissions officers make great efforts to attract male students to increase the gender balance.

A recent study by the American Association of University Women (AAUW) points out, however, that the number of males attending college has not decreased but rather has not increased similarly to that of women (Corbett, Hill, & St. Rose, 2008). Moreover, among students entering college right after high school, men are almost as likely as women to go to college (Hallman, 2008).

Feminists also point out that although women are pursuing higher education at a greater rate than men are, men still hold most positions of power in the field of education. Male teachers are more likely to become principals as women are underrepresented in leadership positions in high schools (Wrushen & Sherman, 2008) despite the fact that women predominantly hold teaching positions in primary and secondary education.

In some areas of the world, many people still believe that higher education is more important for men than women. A 2010 Pew Research Center report reveals that nearly two thirds of people in India (63%) and about half in Pakistan (51%), Egypt (50%), and China (48%) maintain that a college education is more important for a boy than for a girl. A gender gap on the importance of higher education for boys and girls can be found in many nations (including in the United States) but tends to be particularly apparent in Muslim nations. For example, “While majorities of men in Egypt and Jordan say it is more important



Marco Di Lauro/Getty Images

Socially constructed gender roles in different societies throughout the world influence opinions about the importance of higher education for women.

for a boy to receive a university education (60% and 56%, respectively), 60% of women in Egypt and 67% in Jordan disagree. In Pakistan, where more than twice as many men agree (64%) as disagree (30%) that a university education is more important for boys than it is for girls, about half (48%) of women disagree and 36% agree” (Pew Research Center, 2010b, p. 11). These patterns indicate the influence of different cultural values and beliefs on the social construction of gender roles in different societies.

Race-Centered Perspective

Sociologists tend to emphasize either structural factors, such as unequal school funding, or social and cultural factors, such as values and beliefs, to explain the achievement gap between minority and White students. Some social scientists who focus on the impact of culture on minority student achievement maintain that low-income students of color, particularly disadvantaged Black students, have developed an “oppositional culture” that denigrates succeeding in school as “acting White” and prevents them from achieving academic success. They argue that African Americans, because of their status as minorities, hold “certain activities, events, symbols, and meanings as not appropriate for them

because those behaviors, events, symbols, and meanings are characteristic of white Americans” (Fordham & Ogbu 1986, p. 181). Recent findings support the idea that some Black students hold themselves back academically to avoid potential ostracism from their Black peers (Wildhagen, 2011). This could help explain why there are relatively few Black high school students in advanced placement classes.

Prudence Carter, in her 2005 book *Keepin’ It Real: School Success Beyond Black and White*, argues that students of all races value education. She notes, though, that many Black and Latino students are not engaged in their schools and in academics because they do not feel they fit into the school culture. Research on reasons behind the relatively low academic achievement of American Indians also points to a need for educators to recognize and adjust to the subcultures of different minority groups (George, 2011). Educators must make efforts so that *all* students feel welcome and supported in their school environments.

Race-centered theorists who examine structural factors for the racial achievement gap focus on the high percentage of racial minorities who attend schools considered “**drop-out factories**” with teachers who, as noted previously, may have less experience than those in higher-performing schools in more affluent neighborhoods. They advocate for more funding for teachers and afterschool programs for schools with disproportionate numbers of poor and minority students. They say that educational inequality is at the root of the racial achievement gap.

A Closer Look: Should Tracking be Abolished?

For many years, parents and educators have debated the merits of **tracking**, defined as the grouping of students according to ability. Many argue that it is a way of racially segregating classes within schools, rather than an objective grouping of students of different skill levels. Others say that it puts some students on a college track while forcing others onto a low-income track with low expectations and little encouragement to pursue higher education. Still others believe that *not* tracking prevents gifted students from reaching their full potential.

Read “The End of the Stupid Class” at http://www.voiceofsandiego.org/education/article_2b0f6ba2-72a0-11df-9b77-001cc4c002e0.html and think about the pros and cons of tracking. What do you think Durkheim would say about tracking? How would a Marxist evaluate tracking? Would a race-centered theorist agree that tracking is a valuable tool for schools? How do you think tracking affects (a) individual students and (b) the larger society?

3.5 Remedies for Educational Inequality

State and federal governments have taken steps to mitigate educational inequality over the past several decades. For example, over the past 40 years funding reform advocates have successfully sued 28 states for not providing equal funding for school districts within their respective states (Berry & Wysong, 2010). This has prompted many states to provide additional state funding for low-income school districts so that their funding is comparable to districts in wealthier communities with more local revenue for schools.

A Closer Look: The Benefit of Books in the Home

Mariah Evans, associate professor of sociology and resource economics at the University of Nevada, Reno, is a champion of children's exposure to books in the home. Evans led an international study, analyzing more than 70,000 people in 27 countries (including the United States) that examined possible predictors of children's educational attainment. The results of the 20-year study reveal that a 500-book library had as much influence on the level of education a child will attain as having parents with a college education (15–16 years of education). The “book benefit,” while varying in impact, held up across all 27 nations and no matter the level of education of the parents. These findings indicate that even parents with very little education can do much to help their children gain a high level of education simply by bringing books into their home and encouraging their children to read. Evans' findings indicate that even a relatively small number of books can have a major impact. Just 20 books in a house tend to make a significant impact on the level of education children in such households attain. Evans' work gives us one relatively easy way to help address the social problem of educational inequality. You can read more about this study at http://www.educationnews.org/pr_releases/91524.html. Why does access to books help mitigate educational inequality in schools? How does access affect families' ability to have books in the home? How do geography and technology affect access to books?

Education Reform Efforts

Efforts on the federal level include the reform of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The NCLB act focuses increased attention on the need to address achievement gaps (U.S. Department of Education, 2009). However, it has been criticized for narrowing the curriculum, lowering standards, and focusing on test scores rather than overall educational growth (U.S. Department of Education, 2011c). Arne Duncan, Secretary of Education (in the Obama Administration) who graduated from Harvard College with a BA in sociology has provided states flexibility in NCLB requirements “in exchange for rigorous and comprehensive State-developed plans designed to improve educational outcomes for all students, close achievement gaps, increase equity, and improve the quality of instruction” (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). The Obama Administration has also instituted a competitive grant program known as Race to the Top, in which states compete for education funding based on their reform efforts.

Secretary Duncan is experienced in implementing strategies to address educational inequality. As chief executive officer of Chicago Public Schools from 2001 to 2008, Duncan supported charter schools and performance pay for teachers as well as engineering imaginative efforts to keep students from dropping out. He tied attendance levels to funding for schools to encourage schools to find ways to improve attendance and used tickets to sports events as incentives for student attendance. Students identified as at risk for dropping out were required to sign a statement, developed by the Black Star Project, an organization created in 1996, to address the racial achievement gap in Chicago, acknowledging their awareness of the negative consequences of failing to earn a high school diploma (see Figure 3.4).

Figure 3.4: Black Star Project Contract for Finishing High School

By dropping out of school I acknowledge that:

1. I will be less likely to find good jobs that pay well, bad jobs that don't pay well, or maybe any jobs.
2. I will not be able to afford many things that I will see others acquiring.
3. I will be more likely to get caught up in criminal activity and illegal behaviors.
4. I will be more likely to become involved with drugs and excessively involved with alcohol.
5. I will be more likely to spend time in jail or prison.
6. I will be less likely to have a good, stable marriage or relationship.
7. I will not have many choices about where to live. My low economic status will require that I live in undesirable locations.
8. I will be considerably less able to properly care for and educate my children.
9. My children will be more likely to follow in my footsteps and drop out of high school, creating multiple generations of despair and poverty.
10. Most of my friends and associates will also be high school dropouts.
11. I will be more likely not to vote or to lose my voting rights.
12. In short, although I will not, technically lose my rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness; in reality I will lose these rights by losing the ability to exercise them.

THE CHOICE IS YOURS

I understand that by dropping out of school, I am voluntarily giving away my rights, privileges and opportunities. I also understand that by doing so, the quality of my life and the lives of my loved ones will be dramatically decreased.

signature date

or

I will not drop out of school. Instead I will do whatever it takes to graduate from high school and pursue higher education and/or other viable trades or professions that will help me control the quality of my life and my family's life. I have the ability to accomplish this goal, and I fully intend to take advantage of it.

signature date

This "Contract" was produced by The Black Star Project; it is not a real legal document. Stay in school! Services for this flyer were donated by the law firm of Foley and Lardner. For more information about educating Black, Brown, low-income, ethnic and urban children, please call 312/842-3527 or visit our website at www.blackstarproject.org.
<http://www.blackstarproject.org/home/images/documents/drop-out%20contract.pdf>



Riccardo S. Savi/Getty Images

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan is an advocate of increased funding for early childhood education programs.

.....

son, 2011). Providing quality early childhood programs would also help alleviate the enormous expense of daycare for parents of preschool age children.

Duncan's efforts in Chicago, appear to have worked to some extent. The percentage of elementary students in Chicago achieving federally mandated test scores increased from 38% to 67% during Duncan's tenure as CEO of Chicago Public Schools (Basken, 2008). The graduation rate of high school students also rose from 47% to 55% (Associated Press, 2009). As Secretary of Education, Duncan also has advocated for increased funding for early childhood education programs to focus on preventing, rather than closing, the achievement gap (Reynolds, Temple, White, Ou, & Robert-

Teacher-Based Programs

Nongovernment organizations, such as the Black Star Project mentioned previously, also play a role in efforts to diminish educational inequality. Several such organizations positively impact schools. **Teach for America**, a nonprofit organization founded by Wendy Kopp in 1990, tackles education inequality by recruiting graduates from top colleges and universities to teach for two years in impoverished communities. Their goal is to inspire exceptional college graduates to make a short-term difference by teaching in low-income areas and a lifelong difference as educational leaders who can work toward policy changes in the U.S. educational system (Teach for America, 2011).

Similarly, **The New Teacher Project (TNTP)** was established in 1997 to help poor and minority students gain access to excellent teachers. Led for the first decade by Michelle Rhee, who left TNTP to run the Washington, DC, school system, the organization focuses on recruiting highly qualified teachers and matching them with high-poverty and high-minority school districts. It also researches various issues related to inequities in U.S. public school systems. One particular effort of TNTP has been to advocate for more flexibility in recruiting teachers, rewarding competence, and firing incompetent teachers (Levin, Mulhern, & Schunck, 2005). TNTP helps school districts and states create methods to evaluate teachers and principals.

A Closer Look: Susan Fuhrman's Vision for Educational Reform

In a 2008 speech, Susan Fuhrman, president of Columbia University's Teachers College, described her vision for educational reform. Following is an excerpt from her speech.

All students—but especially those in impoverished neighborhoods where basic skills dominate classroom time—need a rich curriculum that includes challenging content, the arts, physical education, exposure to cultural institutions, and more. Certainly addressing the fundamentals is important. But we must also prepare our children to be caring, engaged citizens; to be thinking, feeling individuals capable of recognizing and discovering their own emotions and reactions to the world around them; and to be physically and mentally healthy people who live full lives. We hear every day that children in other nations work hard in school and score higher on international assessments than American students. But changing that picture is not a zero-sum game, in which we must choose between basic literacy and a deeper understanding of important disciplines Let's talk about putting the richness back in the curriculum, so that we don't raise young people who are technically enabled but intellectually, socially, and civically stunted If we improve education for disenfranchised children and communities, then education itself becomes part of the solution to the full range of society's inequities and broader ills. (Fuhrman, 2008, p. 24)

Are Fuhrman's ideas realistic given the current economic climate? How does Fuhrman's speech help you to see the connection between a good educational system and a strong democracy?

Student-Focused Programs

Increased knowledge of the connection among inequalities in income, health, and education is inspiring some new ways to look at educational inequality. Recent studies addressing, among other factors, the growing epidemic of childhood obesity show that



Tim Boyle/Getty Images

Recent studies have shown that healthier children achieve greater academic success.

healthier children do better academically (Carlson, Fulton & Lee, 2008; Basch, 2010). Basch's report states that health concerns have a bigger impact on urban minority schools and suggests that addressing such concerns in a coordinated way is a fundamental aspect of school reform. A 2009 study of high school students by the Centers for Disease Control found a correlation between low grades and high-risk health behavior such as using cigarettes and alcohol, TV watching and lack of exercise. Recognizing the connection between health and educational achievement in 2012 the Obama

administration required that all school lunches measure up to higher nutritional standards, reducing fats, salt, and sugar, and increasing fruits and vegetables served to schoolchildren.

As we discuss in further detail in Chapter 9, children from disadvantaged neighborhoods are less likely to have adequate amounts of nutritious food as well as access to a safe area to play. Providing a variety of healthy food choices at school and devising ways to make exercise fun and available for all students, as is done in the Harlem Children's Zone Promise Academies, can impact the health gap between poor and wealthier students, as well as educational inequality. Begun in 1970 as a truancy prevention center, the Harlem Children's Zone has since expanded to a huge effort to transform 10 blocks in Harlem, New York, into a supportive environment in which children will thrive. Led by Geoffrey Canada, the **Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ)** includes in-school, after-school, social service, health, and community-building programs. HCZ supports the idea that strong communities produce strong schools and well-educated children. A recent Brookings Institute study revealed that students who attended the HCZ Promise Academies performed much better than those from the same background who attended a typical public school in New York City (Whitehurst & Croft, 2010). The Promise Academy schools, in addition to having a longer school day and school year, provide students with meals and afterschool and Saturday tutoring and enrichment programs.

Like other social problems, educational inequality can be reduced if a society desires to make the effort. For example, a 2011 U.S. Department of Education policy brief stated that ensuring the equitable distribution of state and local education funds would require just a 1% to 4% increase in the budgets of school districts that do not now provide equal funding for high and low poverty level schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2011a). On the global level, the United Nations has identified several educational strategies that have made inroads in increasing the percentage of the world's children who have access to primary education. These include abolishing school fees, hiring more teachers, creating more classroom space, promoting the education of girls, and expanding access to schools for those in rural areas (United Nations, 2011). These strategies continue to be part of the U.N.'s effort to achieve by 2015 its Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), a set of universal standards for human needs and basic rights. These results clearly indicate that educational inequality is a social problem that can be successfully addressed.

A Closer Look: The UN Millennium Project

Although a smaller proportion of the world's population now lives in absolute poverty than ever before, the total number of deeply poor is greater than in 1960. Africa is especially afflicted. Pronounced global inequality still prevails, with some 15% of the world's population, largely in North America and Europe, responsible for 70% of global consumption. The developed countries of the world are still well short, moreover, of meeting their stated commitment to devote at least 0.7% of their resources to international aid.

What do you do when the rich countries of the world consistently fail to follow through on their promises when it comes to economic assistance to the poor? How do you respond to the recent history of economic development, which has seen the economies of many of the poorest countries grow rapidly while leaving untouched many of the poorest? For Columbia University economics professor Jeffrey D. Sachs and former Secretary General of the United Nations Kofi Annan, *(continued)*

A Closer Look: The UN Millennium Project (*continued*)

the answer is to reject lofty goals, abstract commitments, and development theories that say you must initially ignore the poor to help them. Instead, you get down into the trenches, take names, start counting, work hard, and hold people (and nations) accountable. That means applauding those who follow through on their commitments, and shaming those who do not.

That, in a nutshell, is what the United Nations Millennium Project, and its “Millennium Development Goals” (MDGs), is all about (World Bank, 2010). After commissioning the Project in 2002 to develop a concrete action plan to address the worst of global poverty, Kofi Annan took that plan from Sachs in 2005 and began lining up commitments from all of the rich countries of the world, and many of the poor, to reach these goals by 2015. At that time the global economy was firing on all cylinders and many of the goals seemed easily attainable. Commitments were easy to obtain. Now, at a time of economic slowdown, the work is more difficult, and progress on some of the goals is behind schedule. But public figures like Sachs, Annan, former President Bill Clinton, rock star Bono, and political elites and grassroots activists from around the world aren’t letting up. Meeting the MDGs by 2015 has become a rallying point for many in the antipoverty movement. They recognize that globalization and economic growth has lifted many out of poverty. But a billion or more people have been side-stepped by this economic growth, and it is for them especially that the MDGs are framed.

The MDGs themselves are deceptively ordinary:

- Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger.
- Achieve universal primary education.
- Promote gender equality and empower women.
- Reduce child mortality.
- Improve maternal health.
- Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases.
- Ensure environmental sustainability.
- Develop a global partnership for development.

What makes them different is the way they are defined. Each comes with a set of specific indicators that gives them teeth: no hiding behind abstract, feel-good statements of intent. This specificity is joined to something unavailable to earlier would-be reformers of the economic-development system—the transparency that comes with the rise of the Web, social media, and the exploding availability of data. For the first time in history, information is rapidly going public about the successes and failures of national and international attempts to help the poor.

Information + public commitments + tangible, difficult, but doable goals + star power + the willingness and ability to point out failures to walk the talk = Success for those in absolute poverty? That’s the question behind the MDGs, and when you drill down, it’s one of the more interesting initiatives on the development scene today. Explore the MDG website at <http://www.worldbank.org/mdgs/>. Pay particular attention to the discussion of progress on the eight MDG goals. What is your assessment of this progress, and what more, in your view, needs to be done? As an economist, Joseph Sachs is quick to acknowledge that rapid economic growth over the past decade (before the global recession) has helped eradicate absolute poverty. Sachs argues, however, that this growth, and the jobs and other opportunities it created, bypassed a significant portion of the world’s poor. This, for Sachs, is the principle rationale for the MDGs. If you were poor, living in an economy with rapid economic growth, what factors might prevent you from benefitting from this growth? Do the MDGs, in your view, fully address these factors? Visit www.one.org, which enjoys the support of U2’s Bono. Watch a few of the videos. What do you see to be the pros and cons of celebrities becoming so centrally involved in social issues like world hunger and global inequality?

Using the Sociological Lens: Education Behind Bars

Do prison education programs offer solutions to social problems, or do they undermine social morals and values?

The United States has the world's highest incarceration rate, which is both a source and symptom of several social problems. The Pew Research Center reports that 1 in 31 Americans are either incarcerated, or on parole or probation. With about 1 in 100 Americans behind bars, the United States has a vested interest in keeping people out of jail, and how to support them while they are incarcerated is a critical social question (2009).

Educating inmates is one approach to the problem. Behind-bars education programs have been shown to reduce recidivism rates and improve inmates' chances of living a law-abiding, productive life once released. In one such study published in 2011, policy analysts at the Institute of Public Policy in the Truman School of Public Affairs at the University of Missouri pored over data from the Missouri Department of Corrections. They found that inmates who earned their high school diploma while behind bars were much more likely to become employed after their release. They were also less likely to return to prison in the future. Inmates who earned their high school diploma and got a full-time job after their release were more than 33% less likely to return to prison again (Hurst, 2011).

Despite these positives, not many prisons sponsor inmate education programs, as they are expensive to maintain and operate. In addition to their high cost, their widespread adoption is prevented by a sense that prison is supposed to be a place of punishment, rather than self-improvement. Indeed, prison education is part of a rehabilitative approach to deviance that some find less appropriate than strictly punitive approaches. The following perspectives consider whether prison education programs offer valuable solutions to social problems, or undermine social morals and values with little benefit to larger society.

States Cannot Afford to Give Prisoners Free Education

Through an educational program called the Windham School District, the state of Texas is among some of the states that let inmates take vocational classes and do college-level course work while serving their sentence. Felons in Texas who sign up for classes must agree to repay the state for the cost of the courses, which are about \$182 for a community college course; \$500 for a university-level course; or \$972 for a vocational course. The program is controversial because although tens of thousands of inmates have taken advantage of the program since 2001, only about 6,600 of them have paid the state back in full. As of 2011, Texas had spent \$26.9 million on the program, but only been reimbursed for \$4.7 million.

Critics say Texas, like many other states whose budgets were depleted during the Great Recession, cannot afford to subsidize a program for inmates when it has cut funding to schools. As Tanh Tan, a reporter for the *Texas Tribune* put it, "It's hard to argue for protecting the right of incarcerated criminals to an education when the state is also reducing public school spending for its children by nearly \$4 billion" (2011). Therefore, in 2011, state lawmakers voted to cut the Windham School District's budget by about 25%, which resulted in the elimination of 271 full-time positions, including 157 teachers. The cuts also reduced salaries, downsized library services, eliminated support staff, and put limits on the number of credits older inmates could take. Overall, the cuts meant that 16,750 fewer inmates would be able to take classes. Given that studies have shown positive social effects from prison education programs, such cuts could increase crime and recidivism rates. Yet on the other hand, with money tight, opponents of the programs argue it is unfair to spend money on prisoner education while civilian education budgets suffer. *(continued)*

Using the Sociological Lens: Education Behind Bars (*continued*)

In the following perspective, the editorial board at the *Austin-American Statesmen* argues that such programs should be eliminated. They say that in addition to costing the struggling state too much money, it is deeply unfair to subsidize the education of criminals while law-abiding citizens must pay for their own education.

“Shut Down Texas Prison Tuition Program,” *Austin-American Statesman (Texas)*, March 25, 2011. <http://www.statesman.com/opinion/shut-down-texas-prison-tuition-program-1349435.html>

Prison Education Programs Reduce Crime

Multiple studies have proven the positive impact of prison education programs on incarcerated inmates and recidivism rates. It has been repeatedly shown that educated inmates behave better while in prison, are released sooner, and are less likely to be sent back to jail after their release.

Several studies have tried to answer the question of whether prisoner education programs save more money than they cost, and whether they are socially worth their cost to society. A study by researchers at University of California, Los Angeles’s School of Public Policy and Social Research examined which was more cost-effective: to educate prisoners, or to expand prisons. It concluded that \$1 million spent on educating inmates prevented about 600 crimes, while investing \$1 million in the construction of additional prison space prevented just 350 crimes (Bauzos & Hausman, 2004). In other words, money spent educating prisoners prevented more crime than did building additional prisons. It also found that because inmates who participate in prison education programs are less likely to commit crime and return to prison after they are released, a \$1 million investment in prison education programs would prevent 26 people from being reincarcerated and save states about \$20,000 per inmate who avoids prison again in the future.

One reason inmate education programs work is that they offer inmates a new perspective on the aspects of life that led them to crime. Jorge Renaud is one such prisoner. Renaud took philosophy and psychology courses while serving his second sentence for robbery in a Texas prison. The experience changed him. “Why does anybody commit a crime? Stupidity, ignorance, irresponsibility,” he said. “I thought I needed material possessions” (Musa, 2011). Chris Deragon, who is serving a 22-year-sentence for robbery and being an accessory to murder, takes similar classes at San Quentin prison in California, and agrees. “Most people believe that I’m being punished and that I shouldn’t have the right to an education,” says Deragon. “But at the same time, if I’m released onto the street and I’m not educated, then you’re just releasing another criminal.”

In the following perspective, Tabitha Cohen argues along these lines: that prisoner education programs are too valuable to be lost to cuts. She contends that such programs cost up front but more than pay for themselves over time.

Tabitha Cohen, “Florida Prison Education Recidivism: Education Programs in Florida Would Reduce Recidivism, Costs to Taxpayers,” *Sun Sentinel (Florida)*, December 30, 2011. http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/2011-12-30/news/fl-prisons-recidivism-cohen-1230-20111230_1_prisons-offer-recidivism-florida-prison (*continued*)

Using the Sociological Lens: Education Behind Bars (*continued*)

Critical Thinking and Discussion Questions

1. Are you bothered by the idea of criminals receiving a free education that is unavailable to law-abiding citizens? Should services our society deems important, such as education, be extended to all members of society, or only law-abiding citizens? Why or why not?
2. The editorial board of the *Austin-American Statesman* argues that taxpayers should not bear the cost of educating inmates. Do you think being unwilling to rehabilitate criminals contributes to the social problem of crime? Or do you think more social problems are created by devoting limited funds to prisoner benefits?
3. What kinds of courses do you think are appropriate to teach to inmates? Are there courses you think are inappropriate to offer in prison education programs?
4. Given what you know on the topic, which approach to crime would you recommend to state officials or government leaders: to erect more prisons, or to spend more on inmate education programs?

For Further Consideration

A Teacher's Perspective

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Summary & Conclusion

A look through the sociological lens reveals that educational inequality is a social problem with wide-ranging impact—it affects everything from individual life chances to the global competitiveness of nations. Educational inequality is a social pattern that violates American core values about opportunity and achievement and negatively affects those in power. Like all social problems, educational inequality can be remedied if society chooses to take on the task.

Educational inequality is evident in unequal funding among school districts and in the racial and economic segregation of public schools that limits opportunity for many. High dropout rates persist in both high school and college. This is occurring at the same time that education is needed to train workers in the skills required for an increasingly service-based U.S. economy. Data clearly show the connection between education and employment, with higher education bettering the chance of getting a job with higher pay. The

nation's business leaders want an educated workforce to compete in the global economy, and progressives want an educated populace of active and informed citizens.

Looking at educational inequality from the different sociological theoretical perspectives helps us to understand the roots of this social problem and some potential solutions. Chapter 3 demonstrates some of the innovative ways educational inequality is being addressed—by government and nonprofit agencies through funding reform and incentives for effectiveness from the state to the student level.

Key Terms

Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court decision of 1954 that declared that racial segregation of schools was unconstitutional.

concerted cultivation A style of parenting in which children are exposed to organized activities meant to foster talents and interactive social skills.

drop-out factories Schools whose teachers have less experience than teachers in higher performing schools in more affluent neighborhoods.

functionally illiterate Having reading and writing skills that are so poor that an individual cannot perform basic living and employment tasks involving printed materials.

Harlem Children's Zone (HCZ) Nonprofit organization founded in the 1990s that provides in-school and after-school programs, social services, and health and community-building programs for low-income children and families living in Harlem in order to break the cycle of poverty.

looking-glass self Term that describes how one's self-image is shaped by how we think others see us.

macro perspective Sociological perspective that views something as a part of society as a whole, such as how it interacts with major social institutions and contributes to a smoothly functioning society.

micro perspective Sociological perspective that focuses on small-scale, everyday interactions between individuals, as opposed to what society does as a whole.

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) Legislation enacted in 2001 to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach proficiency on state academic achievement standards and assessments.

out-of-field teachers Teachers who teach subjects in which they do not specialize.

primary socializing agents Individuals or groups through which a person learns and accepts society's norms and values, including family, school, peers, the media, and religion.

Servicemen's Readjustment Act (G.I. Bill) Legislation enacted in 1944 to reward soldiers who fought in World War II by providing veterans with free college tuition and low-interest housing loans.

shadow education Support beyond students' everyday classroom experience, such as tutoring, test prep, and summer programs, that help prepare them for tests such as the SAT and ACT.

Teach for America A nonprofit organization founded in 1990 that addresses education inequality by recruiting graduates from top colleges and universities to teach for two years in impoverished communities.

The New Teacher Project (TNTP) Non-profit organization founded in 1997 to help poor and minority students gain access to excellent teachers.

tracking The grouping of students into different classes according to academic ability.

Critical Thinking and Discussion Questions

1. How does education factor into The American Dream?
2. Why did John Dewey promote education as a democratic ideal?
3. Why does literacy affect the economic growth of the nation?
4. Which of the theoretical perspectives discussed in this chapter do you think best evaluates and addresses the inequitable educational issues of the United States?
5. What role might oppositional culture play in student success?

