

Editors' Introduction

Education is a vast institution in contemporary societies. Virtually every child on earth today will be exposed to some form of formal schooling. And that child's education will likely play a central role in organizing her development and social identity. As she grows, her education will likely influence her labor market experiences, where and how she lives, her marriage and family-formation decisions, and even her health and life expectancy.

If you're reading this book, you no doubt have a strong personal understanding of schooling as an institution and of its profound social importance. After all, if your educational experience is typical, you spent some fifteen thousand hours in school between the ages of five and eighteen. In the process, you likely worked your way through reams of photocopied worksheets, bubbled in the answers to thousands of multiple choice questions, and negotiated countless complex social encounters in locker-lined hallways and lunchroom lines. And, if you're reading this book as a college student, you likely experienced some measure of success in the process. Like nearly 90 percent of contemporary young people, you earned a high school diploma; and like more than half of those high school graduates, you made the leap into postsecondary education.

Because your experience gives you considerable expertise on education as an institution, this textbook works a little differently from most of the textbooks you encounter. Rather than trying to introduce you to an established and settled body of knowledge (as an anatomy textbook might), or training you in a set of skills (as a computer science textbook might), this book invites you into an ongoing conversation about education and society.

This conversation takes place across a range of venues, including academic journals, conferences, research talks, and—increasingly—social media. One

venue that has been particularly important for the development of this book is a relatively small and informal conference that occurs every spring at a state park in Northern California. Over two days, at the Sociology of Education Association's annual meetings, some seventy to eighty experts on the sociology of education think through dozens of papers and talk and laugh through a handful of meals together. In the process, we share both the excitement of scientific discovery and the entirely different excitement of intense debate. We poke at one another's ideas and explore one another's data in an attempt to broaden our understanding of education—an institution about which we all care deeply.

We have tried to capture some of the spirit of those meetings in this book. Each of the book's chapters and case studies is meant as an introduction to the ideas and evidence that have been formative to the author's ongoing understanding of education as a social institution. As such, each chapter and case study has a viewpoint and an argument to make. You'll likely find it easier to agree with some than others. And in fact, if you read carefully, you'll likely find places in which the authors of chapters or case studies disagree with one another. That is, we think, as it should be.

Education is an incredibly complex, and indeed contradictory, institution in contemporary life. We expect schools to provide opportunities to all, even as they prepare students for highly unequal adult societies and legitimate that inequality. We want schools to teach students how to cooperate even as we ask them to structure hugely influential social competitions. We ask schools to establish and reinforce a shared body of social knowledge, even as they recognize and respect a pluralistic society's diversity of views and experiences. Given the contradictions inherent in contemporary mass education, it is our view that it's appropriate that the sociology of education should also be a contentious and multifaceted field of study.

That said, you will also notice three common threads that run through each of the chapters and case studies. First, central to the sociology of education—and, indeed, all sociology—is the assumption that the social world is knowable. While at any given moment each of us has a limited view of our social setting, sociologists have developed a wide range of qualitative, quantitative, and historical methods that make it possible to subject the interactions, structures, and interpersonal relationships that we collectively describe as *society* to empirical scrutiny. By applying this social scientific view to education, we seek to understand the complex relationship between education and social inequality, the ways in which schools change, and the ways in which changing schools then change society.

Second, the authors of all these chapters and case studies are motivated by the belief that the act of collecting and interpreting information about the world has the potential to make a more just and equitable society. As a result,

the authors dedicate considerable attention to providing an accurate empirical representation of schools and their social role in contemporary societies. The word *empirical* is important here. Sociology thinks of itself as a social science. Consequently, sociologists are committed to producing knowledge that is reproducible and transferable across time and space. We draw upon theory—and indeed our own experiences—to articulate hypotheses. But we also work hard to collect data and subject our hypotheses to rigorous tests. Thinking carefully about the evidence assembled here can shed light on your own educational experiences, the social processes that explain them, and how they compare to those of your peers.

Third, you will notice the concept of *inequality* cropping up repeatedly across chapters and case studies. Questions about why some people have more resources, power, and or status than others, and about the implications of that unequal distribution, are important throughout all aspects of sociology. But they are particularly important in the sociology of education. Schools are egalitarian institutions by their conception, dedicated to the principal that all people have worth and thus deserve opportunities to learn. At the same time, the production and legitimation of inequality is one of education's central roles in contemporary societies. When you graduate from college, your school will give you a degree that is intended to signify all of the work and learning that you did over the course of your college career. That degree will likely confer advantages that students who stopped their schooling before enrolling in college won't be able to access. If it didn't, you'd likely wonder if college was worth the time, money, and effort. In this way and many others, schools create unequal categories and sort youth among them. These categories are templates that influence the contours of inequality throughout contemporary societies.

Each of the chapters and case studies that follow consists of a summary of sociological thinking and research on pressing issues in contemporary schools, written by trail-blazing researchers in the sociology of education. While each of the scholars you read here has a viewpoint, each is also dedicated to producing and thinking through new knowledge.

In the book's first section, two leading authorities in the sociology of education provide broad overviews of the field and its development. In chapter 1, Evan Schofer offers an overview of the field from a global perspective, drawing attention to the ways in which educational systems differ, as well as to the important similarities that exist among educational systems worldwide. In chapter 2, Doug Downey considers the complex relationship between education and social inequality in the contemporary world.

The chapters and case studies in the book's second section take a closer look at student experiences within educational institutions. These chapters and case studies investigate how these school experiences vary with students' *ascriptive* characteristics—including their gender, race, immigration status, and sexual

orientation. In addition, they investigate the informal social processes that occur among students in schools, including interactions between students and teachers and the construction of cliques and other student peer groups.

We conclude the book's second section with a case study that uses the example of Asian American students to explore the ways in which ethnic stereotypes and other social expectations shape students' school experiences. This case study is structured differently from the rest of the chapters in the section. While the others provide you with a broad introduction to the issues and research in a given area, this case study is designed to "go deep" on a single social setting and the sociological questions it raises. As a result, it is structured much more like a scholarly paper in the field of sociology and includes an abstract, an introduction, a methods section, and a set of results. We hope that reading this case study gives you a context in which to explore the ideas that you've encountered elsewhere in *Education and Society*.

The book's third section takes on more formal social *structures* that define contemporary education and its place in society. Our chapters and case studies consider the ways these structures shape the internal organization of schools, influencing what is (and isn't) taught, the ways in which schools sort students into academic tracks and special education categories to facilitate instruction, and school disciplinary processes. In addition, the chapters and case studies in this section address how schools are situated in broader social structures, and how residential and legal arrangements lead to racial and class-based segregation between schools. They also examine the recent policy efforts to introduce market pressures to K–12 education via school choice, and the ways in which colleges and universities interact with the labor market.

We conclude this section, too, with a case study that is structured more like an empirical article in the sociology of education. This article illustrates the diffusion of the school's organization form to a new realm, "life skills" classes offered to poor parents by social service agencies. We think this case sheds light on the many ways in which the social structures that we associate with "schooling" permeate contemporary societies. As a result, we see this case study as a great opportunity to apply the concepts that you encounter elsewhere in *Education and Society*.

As you read and discuss your way through this book, we encourage you to take time to connect the ideas and facts reported here to your own educational experiences and to the broader educational debates that you see in the news. We aim to help you think more broadly about the central place that schools occupy in contemporary societies; about why societies organize schools and other institutions the way they do, and the implications of those organizational decisions; and about why some students experience success in schools while others fall behind, and how those disparate experiences contribute to social inequality.