Education In Society: Crash Course Sociology #40

Crash Course: Sociology
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The average American spends 13 and a half years of their life in school. And that's not counting the amount of time that you spend watching Crash Course. Getting a bachelors degree means spending upwards of 17 years as a student, and advanced degrees like medical degrees or Phd's can tack on another four to six years on top of that.

So, why do we spend so much time in the classroom? With so much information available to us with just a few taps on our phones and computers, it might seem like sitting in the classroom to learn about the world isn't really necessary anymore. But educational institutions aren't just places where we learn facts, and Google is no substitute for the social functions that schools provide.

In fact, neither is Crash Course. So, let's take a look at how educational institutions are organized in our society and what those institutional structures can tell us about how our society functions. You know what I mean when I talk about education, right?

For our purposes, education is the social institution through which society provides its members with all kind of important knowledge. Not just basic facts and job skill, but also cultural norms and values. And this can come in the form of formal schooling where instructions comes from specially trained teachers. But it doens't have to.

What education has looked like across different eras and different places is very different from the schooling that you probably know. Historically, education was a privilege of the wealthy. In fact the word school comes from the Greek word for leisure = Scole.(?~0:38)

In ancient Greece, wealthy young men spent their free time learning from scholars like Socrates, Aristotle and Plato. Nowadays, most high-income countries have formal schooling systems that are available to everyone. So the amount of schooling that the average person gets in most societies is closely tide to the countries level of economical development.

While young people in the US can expect to spend at least 12 years in school, those who live in lower-income countries are much more likely to never get past middle school. The US, however, will be the setting that we'll be using to explore how sociology understands education as a social institution. So, let's go right to the thought bubble for a quick overview of how schooling is structured in the Uhnited States.

In the US, publicly funded schools have existed since almost the beginning of our country. Thomas Jefferson was an early proponent of separating schools from religious institutions, which at the time were the main providers of education. The wide spread availability of public schools really took of in the middle of the nineteenth century, when politician and educational reformer, Horace Mann pushed for Massachusetts to create a formalized state funded system of primary schools.

By 1918, all sates had passed mandatory education laws, which required children to attend school until they reached the age of sixteen. A major aim of these laws was to promote Literacy. Both Jefferson and Mann pushed for public education systems because they believed that a well-educated populace was a necessary requirement for a democracy.

Nowadays, about 87% of students in the US attend public schools, which start in the Kindergarten when children are five. And when I say public schools, this refers to schools funded through the government with taxpayer dollars. And of course, US public schools are organized into Primary and Secondary education. Compulsory education starts with Elementary school, which begins, for most Americans, around age five and continues through fifth grade until ages ten or eleven.

These grades are considered Primary schooling. Starting at age eleven or twelve, children enter Middle or Junior Highschool which consists of grades 6th through 8th in most states. Around age fourteen, they typically enter Highschool, which often includes 9th through 12th grades. Middle and Highschool are also referred to as Secondary School.

And many school districts offer alternatives to the standard high school curriculum in the form of vocational and technical training schools. Sometimes known as Votech schools. Votech schools focus on teaching specific skills like automotive repair or cosmetology and students leave school with certifications that help them enter the workforce right away. Thanks thought bubble.

Another educational option is Private school, those schools not funded by taxpayer dollars. Why may the family choose a private school over a public school? Well, for one thing, private schools are often able to tailor their curricula to specific populations. Because public schools are open to everybody, they try to serve the widest swath of the student populace, what's sometime's referred to as teaching the middle. So the 10% of American students who attend private schools might be there in search of a more rigorous education.

Parents of kids with disabilities may also choose a private school that specifically tailor to their child's needs, which may not be available in a public school. And it's worth pointing out that most private schools in the US are religiously affiliated. These school provide religious instruction alongside academic training.

A practice that's not allowed in public schools. You know, because of the whole separation of church and state thing in the constitution. Another option for parents that don't want to send their kids to public school is homeschooling.

That's just where a kid is educated at home, typically by a parent. About 3% of students in the US are homeschooled. All of these different approaches to education cover the K-12 years, when children are required to attend school.

But some people may choose to keep going to school and enter post-secondary institutions, better known as college or university. Unlike primary and secondary schooling, post-secondary schooling - in the US at least- is largely funded but the students themselves. Public state colleges and universities are joint ventures between taxpayers and students who pay some tuition to attend.

Two-year colleges, sometimes known as Junior or Community colleges typically give associate degrees, technical certifications and sometimes high school equivalency degrees or GEDs. The highest level of education attained by 28% of Americans over the age of 25 is attending some college or completing a two-year degree. Four-year institutions in the US can either be public universities funded jointly by state taxes and student tuition, or private universities funded almost exclusively through tuition and private donations.

The reason I keep talking about funding is that in the US paying for college is one of the highest barriers to getting a post-secondary education. As a result, going to college is by no means a given for Americans. Only 32.5% of Americans over the age of 25 have graduated with a bachelor's degree from a four-year university. Of these graduates, about one third will go on to get more education like medical school or a masters or a doctorate in a discipline. Like sociology.

12% of Americans over the age of 25 have some sort of advanced degree. Education must matter an awful lot for people to willingly choose to spend so much time and money on it. And, of course, our schools of sociological thought can help us understand how educational systems help shape society and why education carries such importance in people's lives. Today, we'll be looking at Sturctural Functionalism and Symbolic Interctionism and next week, we'll look more in-depth at education using a conflict theory perspective.

As you might expect by this point, structural functionalism looks at how formal education helps keep a society running smoothly. Because structural functionalism looks at everything that way.

And we can think of how education works in society in terms of both manifest and latent functions. Manifest functions are intended consequences of education. And an obvious example of a manifest function is just teaching kids the basic facts about the world.

It's pretty hard to get through the world without knowing how to read or write. And even for people that don't use math every single day, it's pretty useful to be able to calculate a 20% tip without needing to pull out a calculator.

Another manifest function of schooling is socialization. By going to school outside the home, kids begin to learn norms and values beyond what their parents might teach them. For example, schools engage in cultural transmission, or passing along knowledge to a new generation of citizens. Children in public schools start their day by pledging allegiance to the American flag -and by doing so, learn patriotic values. Similarly, civics and history courses teach them how political processes work, which helps create a well-informed, well-functioning civil society.

In this way, schools also act to promote social integration, taking people from different backgrounds and exposing them to social norms and cultural values, in an effort to promote a shared understanding of the social world.

And educational institutions do more than just pass on knowledge, they also help us create new knowledge through cultural innovation and research. Every major advance in our society - whether it's the technology of self-driving cars, or new understandings of the inequalities we see in the world - has been possible because it built on the knowledge we learn in schools.

Yet another manifest function of schools is to educate the future workforce, teaching the skills that people need to be productive members of society. So formal education acts as a form of credentialing a way o establishing someone's qualifications to work in a certain field. You know that diploma you got when you graduated, or will get when you do graduate? That's document proof of your credentials. And educational credentials are often used as a way of determining social status - they determine social placement by telling us who can access which jobs, and how much they should be paid for that work - factors that determine socioeconomic status.

Now, in addition to all these intended functions of education, there are some unintended consequences ,or latent functions, of schooling too. One of the more important ones is learning how to be a good 9 to 5 worker. Horace Mann's original vision of public schools was based on a Prussina model of schooling now known as the "factory school model", because it teaches children how to work within a set schedule and listen to authority figures. Those are skills that come in handy as an adult when your boss tells you to be at your desk at 9 in the morning.

K-12 schools also provide childcare that makes working parent's lives easier - not the intended purpose of schools certainly, but a pretty useful latent function. And a third latent function of schools is that they just, help you make friends. Shcools help people form social groups by introducing them to many people around their same age. This also makes it easy to meed and interact with potential romantic partners around your age - which might be why we see so many college and high school sweethearts who tie the knot.

Structural functionalism stresses all the ways that schooling helps maintain the order and stability of our society. But our other theories of sociological thought point out that educational institutions may maintain practices that are not beneficial to everyone. Recall that symbolic-interactionist approaches explore how people create the world that we live in through their day-to-day interactions. In the context of education, we see this play out in how stereotypes created by society can turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy. Teachers who believe a student has a high ability tend to give that student more attention and feedback, which in turn helps that student believe that they have a high ability, which in turn helps that student develop greater academic ability.

Similarly, if you decide that you're just not a "math person", you might try to avoid doing math at all and stop taking math classes as soon as your school lets you - which will pretty much guarantee that you end up not being all that good at math. Self-fulfilling prophecies can have very real consequences when its beliefs about student's abilities are influenced by stereotypes of race, gender or class. The lower graduation rate of racial minorities is one outcome. So too is women's under-representation in science, technology, engineering and math fields.

Next week, we'll use the lens of social conflict theory to explore more about how schooling can both cause and perpetuate social inequalities.

This week, we discussed the history of education as a social institution, with a specific focus on hos the US organizes its educational system. We also talked about structural functionalist approaches to education and some of the manifest and latent functions associated with education. Finally, we discussed a symbolic interactionist approach to education that shows us how self-fulfilling prophecies in educational settings contribute to differences in academic outcomes for students.

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