



# 17

Chapter

## Education





Mississippi

**K**athy Spiegel was upset. Horace Mann, the school principal in her hometown in Oregon, had asked her to come to his office. He explained that Kathy's 11-year-old twins had been acting up in class. They were disturbing other children and the teacher—and what was Kathy going to do about this?

Kathy didn't want to tell Mr. Mann what he could do with the situation. *That* would have gotten her kicked out of the office. Instead, she bit her tongue and said she would talk to her daughters.

**Kathy's 11-year-old twins were disturbing other children and the teacher—and what was Kathy going to do about this?**

\* \* \* \* \*

On the other side of the country, Jim and Julia Attaway were pondering their own problem. When they visited their son's school in the Bronx, they didn't like what they saw. The boys looked like they were junior gang members, and the girls dressed and acted as though they were sexually active. Their own 13-year-old son had started using street language at home, and it was becoming increasingly difficult to communicate with him.

\* \* \* \* \*

In Minneapolis, Denzil and Tamika Jefferson were facing a much quieter crisis. They found life frantic as they hurried from one school activity to another. Their 13-year-old son attended a private school, and the demands were so intense that it felt like the junior year in high school. They no longer seemed to have any relaxed family time together.

\* \* \* \* \*

In Atlanta, Jaime and Maria Morelos were upset at the ideas that their 8-year-old daughter had begun to express at home. As devout first-generation Protestants, Jaime and Maria felt moral issues were a top priority, and they didn't like what they were hearing.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kathy talked the matter over with her husband, Bob. Jim and Julia discussed their problem, as did Denzil and Tamika and Jaime and Maria. They all came to the same conclusion: The problem was not their children. The problem was the school their children attended. All four sets of parents also came to the same solution: home schooling for their children.



**education** a formal system of teaching knowledge, values, and skills

Home schooling might seem to be a radical solution to today's education problems, but it is one that the parents of over a million U.S. children have chosen. We'll come back to this topic, but, first, let's take a broad look at education.

## The Development of Modern Education

To provide a background for understanding our own educational system, let's look first at education in earlier societies, then trace the development of universal education.

### Education in Earlier Societies

Earlier societies had no separate social institution called education. They had no special buildings called schools and no people who earned their living as teachers. Rather, as an ordinary part of growing up, children learned what was necessary to get along in life. If hunting or cooking were the essential skills, then parents and other relatives taught them to the children. *Education was synonymous with acculturation*, learning a culture. It still is in today's tribal groups.

In some societies—such as China, Greece, and North Africa—when a sufficient surplus developed, a separate institution for education appeared. Some people then devoted themselves to teaching, while those who had the leisure—the children of the wealthy—became their students. In ancient China, for example, Confucius taught a few select pupils, while in Greece, Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates taught science and philosophy to upper-class boys. Education, then, came to be something distinct from informal acculturation. **Education** is a group's *formal* system of teaching knowledge, values, and skills. Such instruction stood in marked contrast to the learning of traditional skills such as farming or hunting, for it was intended to develop the mind. Education flourished during the period roughly marked by the birth of Christ, then slowly died out. During the Dark Ages of Europe, monks kept the candle of enlightenment burning. Except for a handful of the wealthy and some members of the nobility, only the monks could read and write. Although the monks delved into philosophy, they focused on learning Greek, Latin, and Hebrew so that they could study the Bible and writings of early church leaders. The Jews also kept formal learning alive as they studied the Torah. In the Arab world, the center of learning was Baghdad, where the focus was on the Koran, poetry, philosophy, linguistics, and astronomy.

Formal education remained limited to those who had the leisure to pursue it. (The word *school* comes from the Greek word *scholē* meaning “leisure.”) Industrialization transformed education, for some of the machinery and new types of jobs required workers to read, write, and work accurately with numbers—the classic three R's of the nineteenth century (Reading, 'Riting, and 'Rithmetic).

### Industrialization and Universal Education

After the American Revolution, the founders of the new republic were concerned that the many contrasting religious and ethnic groups (nationalities) would make the nation unstable. To help create a uniform national culture, Thomas Jefferson and Noah Webster proposed universal schooling. Standardized texts would instill patriotism and



In hunting and gathering societies, there is no separate social institution called *education*. Instead, children learn from their parents and elders. These boys in South Africa are learning survival skills as their grandfather shows them lizard tracks in the sand.



teach the principles of representative government (Hellinger and Judd 1991). If this new political experiment were to succeed, they reasoned, it would need educated citizens who were capable of making sound decisions and voting wisely. A national culture remained elusive, however, and the country remained politically fragmented into the 1800s. Many states even considered themselves to be near-sovereign nations.

Education reflected this disunity. There was no comprehensive school system, just a hodgepodge of independent schools. Public schools even charged tuition. Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Roman Catholics operated their own schools (Hellinger and Judd 1991). Children of the rich attended private schools. Children of the poor received no formal education—nor did slaves. High school was considered higher education (hence the name *high* school), and only the wealthy could afford it. College, too, was beyond the reach of almost everyone.

Horace Mann, an educator from Massachusetts, found it deplorable that parents with an average income could not afford to send their children to grade school. In 1837 he proposed that “common schools,” supported through taxes, be established throughout his state. Mann’s idea spread, and state after state began to provide free public education. It is no coincidence that universal education and industrialization occurred at the same time. As they observed the transformation of the economy, political and civic leaders recognized the need for an educated workforce. They also feared the influx of “foreign” values and, like the founders of the country, looked on public education as a way to “Americanize” immigrants (Hellinger and Judd 1991).

By 1918, all U.S. states had **mandatory education laws** requiring children to attend school, usually until they completed the eighth grade or turned 16, whichever came first. By this time, schooling had become widespread, and graduation from the eighth grade marked the end of education for most people. “Dropouts” at that time were students who did not complete grade school.

As industrialization progressed and fewer people made their living from farming, even more years of formal education came to be regarded as essential to the well-being of society. As graduation from high school became more common, more students wanted a college education. Free education stopped with high school, however, and with the distance to the nearest college too far and the cost of tuition and lodging too great, most high school graduates were unable to attend college. As is discussed in the Down-to-Earth Sociology box on the next page, this predicament gave birth to community colleges. Figure 17.1 shows the incredible change in

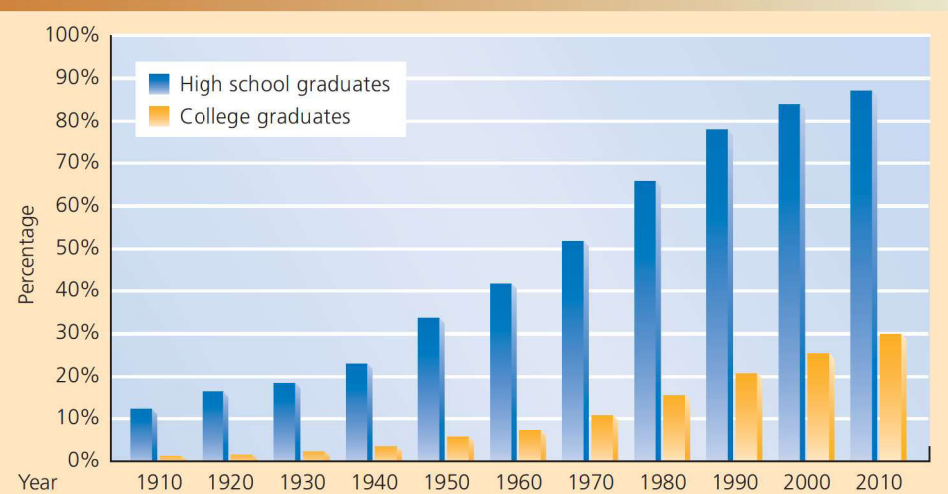


This 1902 photo from Tuskegee, Alabama, provides a glimpse into the past, when free public education, pioneered in the United States, was still in its infancy. In these one-room rural schools, a single teacher had charge of grades 1 to 8. Children were assigned a grade not by age but by mastery of subject matter.

#### mandatory education laws

laws that require all children to attend school until a specified age or until they complete a minimum grade in school

**FIGURE 17.1** Educational Achievement in the United States



Note: Americans 25 years and over.

Sources: By the author. Based on National Center for Education Statistics 1991:Table 8; *Statistical Abstract of the United States* 2011:Table 225.



## Down-to-Earth Sociology

### Community Colleges: Facing Old and New Challenges

I attended a junior college in Oakland, California. From there, with fresh diploma in hand, I transferred to a senior college—a college in Fort Wayne, Indiana, that had no freshmen or sophomores.

I didn't realize that my experimental college matched the vision of some of the founders of the community college movement. In the early 1900s, they foresaw a system of local colleges that would be accessible to the average high school graduate—a system so extensive that it would be unnecessary for universities to offer courses at the freshman and sophomore levels (Manzo 2001).

A group with an equally strong opinion questioned whether preparing high school graduates for entry to four-year colleges and universities should be the goal of junior colleges. They insisted that the purpose of junior colleges should be vocational preparation, to equip people for the job market as electricians and other technicians. In some regions, where the proponents of transfer dominated, the admissions requirements for junior colleges were higher than those of Yale (Pedersen 2001). This debate was never won by either side, and you can still hear its echoes today (Van Noy et al. 2008).

The name *junior* college also became a problem. Some felt that the word *junior* made their institution sound as though it weren't quite a real college. A struggle to change the name ensued, and several decades ago *community* college won out.

The name change didn't settle the debate about whether the purpose was preparing students to transfer to universities or training them for jobs, however. Community colleges continue to serve this dual purpose.

Community colleges have become such an essential part of the U.S. educational system that almost two of every five (36 percent) of all undergraduates in the United States are enrolled in them (*Statistical Abstract* 2011:Table 275). They have become the major source of the nation's emergency medical technicians, firefighters, nurses, and police officers. Most students are *nontraditional*



*Community colleges have opened higher education to millions of students who would not otherwise have access to college because of cost or distance.*

students: Many are age 25 or older, are from the working class, have jobs and children, and attend college part-time (Bryant 2001; Panzarella 2008).

To help students who are not seeking occupational certificates transfer to four-year colleges and universities, many community colleges work closely with top-tier public and private universities (Chaker 2003b). Some provide admissions guidance on how to enter flagship state schools. Others coordinate courses, making sure that they match the university's title and numbering system, as well as its rigor of instruction and grading. More than a third offer honors programs that prepare talented students to transfer with ease into these schools (Padgett 2005).

Community colleges face the challenges of securing adequate budgets in the face of declining resources, adjusting to changing job markets, and maintaining quality instruction. Other challenges include offering effective remedial courses, meeting the shifting needs of students, such as teaching students for whom English is a second language, and providing on-campus day care for parents. In their quest to help students complete college, community colleges are also working to improve their orientation programs and to find better ways to monitor their students' progress (Panzarella 2008).

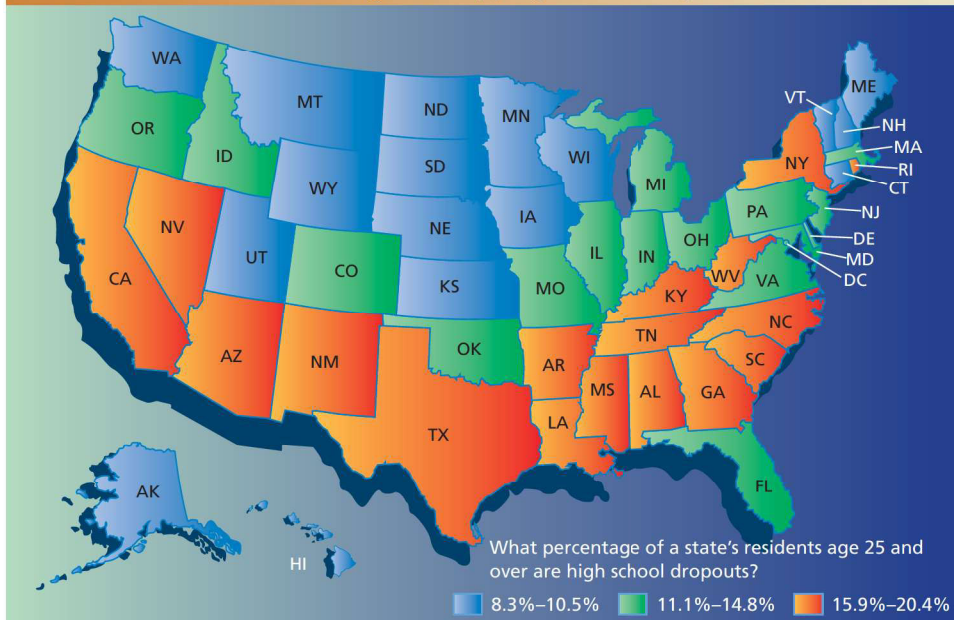
### For Your Consideration

Do you think the primary goal of community colleges should be to prepare students for jobs or to prepare them to transfer to four-year colleges and universities? Why?

educational achievement. As you can see, receiving a bachelor's degree is now *twice* as common as completing high school used to be. Two of every three (69 percent) high school graduates enter college (*Statistical Abstract* 2011:Table 272).

*One of seven* Americans has not made it through high school, however, which leads to economic problems for most of them for the rest of their lives (*Statistical Abstract* 2011:Table 225). The Social Map on the next page shows how unevenly distributed high school graduation is among the states. You may want to compare this Social Map with the one on page 283 that shows how poverty is distributed among the states.



**FIGURE 17.2** Not Making It: Dropping Out of High School

*Note:* The states vary widely. The extremes range from 9.3 percent in Minnesota to 22.1 percent in Mississippi.

*Source:* By the author. Based on *Statistical Abstract of the United States 2011*: Table 229.

## Education in Global Perspective

To further place our own educational system in perspective, let's look at education in three countries at different levels of industrialization. This will help us see how education is related to a nation's culture and its economy.

### Education in the Most Industrialized Nations: Japan

*A central sociological principle of education is that a nation's education reflects its culture.* Because a core Japanese value is solidarity with the group, the Japanese discourage competition among individuals. In the workforce, people who are hired together work as a team. They are not expected to compete with one another for promotions; instead, they are promoted as a group (Ouchi 1993). Japanese education reflects this group-centered approach to life. Children in grade school work as a group, all mastering the same skills and materials. On any one day, children all over Japan study the same page from the same textbook ("Less Rote . . ." 2000).

In a fascinating cultural contradiction, college admissions in Japan are highly competitive. The Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT), taken by college-bound high school juniors and seniors in the United States, is voluntary, but Japanese seniors who want to attend college must take a national test. U.S. students who perform poorly on their tests can usually find some college to attend—as long as their parents can pay the tuition. Until recently, in Japan only the top scorers—rich and poor alike—were admitted to college. This is changing. Because of Japan's low birth rate, the pool of students has shrunk and Japan's colleges have begun to compete for students (McNeill 2008). As in the United States, children from the richer families score higher on college admission tests and are more likely to go to college. In each country, to be born into a richer family means to inherit privileges—among them having more highly educated parents, from grade school through high school being expected to bring home top grades, and enjoying cultural experiences that translate into higher test scores.



**manifest functions**

the intended beneficial consequences of people's actions

**latent functions**

unintended beneficial consequences of people's actions

**credential society** the use of diplomas and degrees to determine who is eligible for jobs, even though the diploma or degree may be irrelevant to the actual work

**cultural transmission of values** the process of transmitting values from one group to another; often refers to how cultural traits are transmitted across generations and, in education, the ways in which schools transmit a group's culture, especially its core values

## Education in the Industrializing Nations: Russia

After the Russian Revolution of 1917, the Soviet Communist party changed the nation's educational system. At that time, as in most countries, education was limited to children of the elite. The communists expanded the educational system until eventually it encompassed all children. Following the sociological principle that education reflects culture, the new government made certain that socialist values dominated its schools, for it saw education as a means to undergird the new political system. As a result, schoolchildren were taught that capitalism was evil and that communism was the salvation of the world. Every classroom was required to prominently display photographs of Lenin and Stalin.

Education, including college, was free. Just as the economy was directed from central headquarters in Moscow, so was education. Schools stressed mathematics and the natural sciences. Each school followed the same state-prescribed curriculum, and all students in the same grade used the same textbooks. To prevent critical thinking, which might lead to criticisms of communism, few courses in the social sciences were taught, and students memorized course materials, repeating lectures on oral exams (Deaver 2001).

Russia's switch from communism to capitalism brought a change in culture—especially new ideas about profit, private property, and personal freedom. This, in turn, meant that the educational system had to adjust to the country's changing values and views of the world. Not only did the photos of Lenin and Stalin come down, but also, for the first time, private, religious, and even foreign-run schools were allowed. For the first time as well, teachers were able to encourage students to think for themselves.

The problems that Russia confronted in “reinventing” its educational system are mind-boggling. Tens of thousands of teachers who had been teaching students to memorize Party-dictated political answers had to learn new methods of instruction. As the economy faltered during Russia's early transition to capitalism, school budgets dwindled. Some teachers went unpaid for months; instead of money, at one school teachers were given toilet paper and vodka (Deaver 2001). Teachers are now paid regularly (and in money), but the salaries are low. University professors average only \$300 to \$500 a month (Nemtsova 2008). Abysmal salaries have encouraged corruption, and some students pay for good grades and for admission to the better schools (“Russia Sets Out to . . .” 2007).

Because it is true of education everywhere, we can confidently predict that Russia's educational system will continue to reflect its culture. Its educational system will glorify

Russia's historical exploits and reinforce its values and world views—no matter how they might change.

## Education in the Least Industrialized Nations: Egypt

Education in the Least Industrialized Nations stands in sharp contrast to that in the industrialized world. Because most of the citizens of these nations work the land or take care of families, there is little emphasis on formal schooling. Mandatory attendance laws are not enforced. As we saw in Figure 9.3 (pages 248–249), many people in the Least Industrialized Nations live on less than \$1,000 a year. Consequently, in some of these nations few children go to school beyond the first couple of grades. Figure 17.3 on the next page contrasts education in China with that of the United States. As was once common around



The poverty of the Least Industrialized Nations carries over to their educational systems. This school in Bangladesh is better off than some, which have no books, paper, or even buildings, just a blackboard on the street.



the globe, it is primarily the wealthy in the Least Industrialized Nations who have the means and the leisure for formal education—especially anything beyond the basics. As an example, let's look at education in Egypt.

Several centuries before the birth of Christ, Egypt's world-renowned centers of learning produced such acclaimed scientists as Archimedes and Euclid. The primary areas of study during this classic period were astronomy, geography, geometry, mathematics, medicine, philosophy, and physics. The largest library in the world was at Alexandria. Fragments from the papyrus manuscripts of this library, which burned to the ground, have been invaluable in deciphering ancient manuscripts. After Rome defeated Egypt, however, education declined and has never regained its former prominence.

Although the Egyptian constitution guarantees five years of free grade school for all children, many poor children receive no education at all. For those who do attend school, qualified teachers are few, and classrooms are crowded (Cook 2001). As a result, one-third of Egyptian men and over half of Egyptian women are illiterate (UNESCO 2005). Those who go beyond the five years of grade school attend a preparatory school for three years. High school also lasts for three years. During the first two years, all students take the same courses, but during the third year they specialize in arts, science, or mathematics. The emphasis has been on memorizing facts to pass national tests. As concerns have grown that this approach leaves minds less capable of evaluating life and opens the door to religious extremism, some Egyptian educators are pressing for critical thinking to be added to the curriculum (Gauch 2006). So far the government has been slow to respond, and little has changed (Dhillon et al. 2008).

## The Functionalist Perspective: Providing Social Benefits

A central position of functionalism is that when the parts of society are working properly, each contributes to the well-being or stability of that society. The positive things that people intend their actions to accomplish are known as **manifest functions**. The positive consequences they did not intend are called **latent functions**. Let's look at the functions of education.

### Teaching Knowledge and Skills

Education's most obvious manifest function is to teach knowledge and skills—whether the traditional three R's or their more contemporary counterparts, such as computer literacy. Each generation must train the next to fill the group's significant positions. Because our postindustrial society needs highly educated people, the schools supply them.

But testing in algebra or paragraph construction to sell gizmos at Radio Shack? Sociologist Randall Collins (1979) observed that industrialized nations have become **credential societies**. By this, he means that employers use diplomas and degrees as *sorting devices* to determine who is eligible for a job. Because employers don't know potential workers, they depend on schools to weed out the incapable. For example, when you graduate from college, potential employers will presume that you are a responsible person—that you have shown up for numerous classes, have turned in scores of assignments, and have demonstrated basic writing and thinking skills. They will then graft their particular job skills onto this foundation, which has been certified by your college.

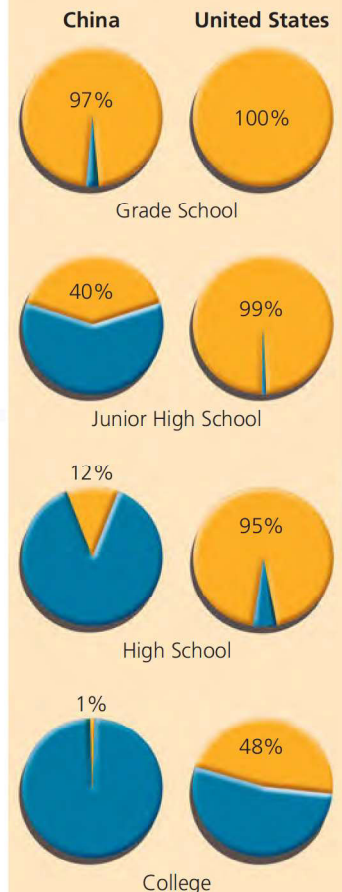
In some cases, job skills must be mastered before you are allowed to do the work. On-the-job training was once adequate to become an engineer or an airline pilot, but with changes in information and technology it is no longer sufficient. This is precisely why doctors display their credentials so prominently. Their framed degrees declare that an institution of higher learning has certified them to work on your body.

### Cultural Transmission of Values

Another manifest function of education is the **cultural transmission of values**, a process by which schools pass on a society's core values from one generation to the next. Consequently,

**FIGURE 17.3**  
Education in a Most Industrialized (Postindustrial) Nation and a Least Industrialized Nation

Who Goes to School?  
Comparing China and the United States



Note: These are initial attendance rates, not completion rates. The U.S. junior high school total is the author's estimate.

Sources: Brauchli 1994; Kahn 2004; Zeng and Wang 2007; *Statistical Abstract of the United States* 2011: Tables 215, 219, 269.



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"Hey, how come no diplomas?" "Oh, I'm self-taught."

The cartoonist captures a primary reason that we have become a credential society.

schools in a socialist society stress values of socialism, while schools in a capitalist society teach values that support capitalism. U.S. schools, for example, stress the significance of private property, individualism, and competition.

Regardless of a country's economic system, loyalty to the state is a cultural value, and schools around the world teach patriotism. U.S. schools—as well as those of Russia, France, China, and other countries around the world—extol the society's founders, their struggle for freedom from oppression, and the goodness of the country's social institutions. Seldom is this function as explicit as it is in Japan, where the law requires that schools "cultivate a respect for tradition and culture, and love for the nation and homeland" (Nakamura 2006).

To visualize what the functionalists mean, consider how differently a course in U.S. history would be if taught in Cuba, Iran, and Muncie, Indiana.

## Social Integration

Schools also bring about *social integration*. They promote a sense of national identity by having students salute the flag and sing the national anthem. One of the best examples of how U.S. schools promote political integration is how they have taught mainstream ideas and values to tens of millions of immigrants. Coming to regard themselves as Americans, the immigrants gave up their earlier national and cultural identities (Carper 2000; Thompson 2009).

This integrative function of education goes far beyond making people similar in their appearance, speech or even ways of thinking. *To forge a national identity is to stabilize the political system.* If people identify with a society's institutions and *perceive them as the basis of their own welfare*, they have no reason to rebel. This function is especially significant when it comes to the lower social classes, from which most social revolutionaries emerge. The wealthy already have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, but getting the lower classes to identify with a social system *as it is* goes a long way toward preserving the system in its current state.

People with disabilities often have found themselves left out of the mainstream of society. To overcome this, U.S. schools have added a manifest function, **mainstreaming**, or inclusion. This means that educators try to incorporate students with disabilities into regular school activities. As a matter of routine policy, students with disabilities used to be placed in special classes or schools. There, however, they learned to adjust to a specialized situation, leaving them ill prepared to cope with the dominant world. To overcome this, U.S. schools have added a manifest function, mainstreaming, or inclusion. As in the photo on the next page, this means that educators try to incorporate students with disabilities into regular school activities. Wheelchair ramps are provided for people who cannot walk; interpreters who use sign language may attend classes with those who cannot hear. Most students who are blind attend special schools, as do people with severe learning disabilities. Most mainstreaming seems to go fairly smoothly, but mainstreaming students with serious emotional and behavioral problems disrupts classrooms, frustrates teachers, and increases teacher turnover (Tomsho and Golden 2007). Overall, one half of students with disabilities now attend school in regular classrooms (U.S. Department of Education 2007).

## Gatekeeping

**Gatekeeping**, or determining which people will enter what occupations, is another function of education. One type of gatekeeping is *credentialing*—using diplomas and degrees to determine who is eligible for a job—which opens the door of opportunity for some and closes it to others. Gatekeeping is often accomplished by **tracking**, sorting students into different educational programs on the basis of their perceived abilities. Some U.S. high

**mainstreaming** helping people to become part of the mainstream of society

**gatekeeping** the process by which education opens and closes doors of opportunity; another term for the *social placement* function of education

**tracking** in education, the sorting of students into different programs on the basis of perceived abilities



schools funnel students into one of three tracks: general, college prep, or honors. Students on the lowest track are likely to go to work after high school, or to take vocational courses. Those on the highest track usually attend prestigious colleges. Those in between usually attend a local college or regional state university. The impact is lifelong, affecting opportunities for jobs, income, and lifestyle. Schools have retreated from formal tracking, but placing students in “ability groups” and “advanced” classes serves the same purpose (Lucas 1999; Tach and Farkas 2003).

Gatekeeping sorts people on the basis of merit, said functionalists Talcott Parsons (1940), Kingsley Davis, and Wilbert Moore (Davis and Moore 1945). They pioneered a view known as **social placement**, arguing that some jobs require few skills and can be performed by people of lesser intelligence. Other jobs, however, such as that of physician, require high intelligence and advanced education. To motivate capable people to postpone gratification and to put up with years of rigorous education, rewards of high income and prestige are offered. Thus, functionalists look at education as a system that, to benefit society, sorts people according to their abilities and ambitions.

## Replacing Family Functions

Over the years, the functions of U.S. schools have expanded, and they now rival some family functions. Child care is an example. Grade schools do double duty as babysitters for families in which both parents work, or for single working mothers. Child care has always been a latent function of formal education, for it was an unintended consequence. Now, however, with two wage earners in most families, child care has become a manifest function, and some schools offer child care both before and after the school day. Some high schools even provide nurseries for the children of their teenaged students (Bosman 2007). Another function is providing sex education, and, as in 500 school-based health centers, birth control (Elliott 2007). This has stirred controversy, for some families resent schools taking this function away from them. Disagreement over values has fueled the social movement for home schooling, featured in our opening vignette and in the Down-to-Earth Sociology box on the next page.

## Other Functions

Education also fulfills other functions. One is *matchmaking*. Because most students are unmarried, it is at high school and college that many people meet their future spouses. The sociological significance is that schools funnel people into marriage with mates of similar background, interests, and education. Schools are also a source of *social networks*; some students make lifetime friendships, while others make contacts that benefit their careers. Schools also help to *reduce the unemployment rate*. To keep millions of young people in the classroom is to keep them out of the job market. Schools also *stabilize society* by keeping these millions off the streets, where they might be holding demonstrations and demanding change in the political system.

Another function of schools is to provide employment. With 49 million students in grade and high schools, and another 19 million enrolled in college, U.S. education is big business. Elementary and secondary schools provide jobs for over 4 million teachers and staff, while another 3 million teachers and staff work at colleges and universities (*Statistical Abstract* 2011:Tables 239, 251, 268, 292). Others earn their living in industries that service schools—from publishing textbooks to building schools and manufacturing pencils, paper, desks, and computers.



Children with disabilities used to be sent to special schools. In a process called *mainstreaming* or inclusion, they now attend regular schools. Shown here is a girl with cerebral palsy participating in music class in Gun Barrel City, Texas.

**social placement** a function of education—funneling people into a society's various positions



## Down-to-Earth Sociology

### Home Schooling: The Search for Quality and Values

“You’re doing WHAT? You’re going to teach your kids at home?” is the typical, incredulous response to parents who decide to home school their children. The unspoken questions are, “How can you teach? You’re not trained. And taking your kids out of the public schools—Do you want your kids to be dumb and social misfits?”

The home-schooling movement was small at first, just a trickle of parents who were dissatisfied with the rigidity of the school bureaucracy, lax discipline, incompetent teachers, low standards, lack of focus on individual needs, and, in some instances, hostility to their religion. That trickle grew into a social movement, and now 1,500,000 U.S. children are being taught at home (*Statistical Abstract 2011*:Table 236).

Home schooling is far from new. In the colonial era, home schooling was the *typical* form of education (Carper 2000). Today’s home-schooling movement is restoring this earlier pattern, but it also reflects a fascinating shift in U.S. politics. Political and religious *liberals* began the contemporary home-schooling movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Their objection was that the schools were too conservative. Then the schools changed, and in the 1970s and 1980s, political and religious *conservatives* embraced home schooling (Lines 2000; Stevens 2001). Their objection was that the schools were too liberal. Other parents have no political motivation. They are homeschooling their children because of concerns about safety at school and the lack of individual attention (Cooper and Sureau 2007; MacFarquhar 2008).

Does home schooling work? Can parents who are not trained as teachers actually teach? To find out, researchers tested 21,000 home schoolers across the nation (Rudner 1999). The results were astounding. The median scores for every test at every grade were in the 70th to 80th percentiles. The home schoolers outscored students in both public and Catholic schools.

The basic reason for the stunning success of home schooling appears to be the parents’ involvement in their children’s education. Home schoolers receive an intense, one-on-one education. Their curriculum—although it includes the subjects that are required by the state—is designed around the student’s interests and needs. Ninety percent of students are taught by their mothers, ten percent by their fathers (Lines 2000). The parents’ income is also above average.

We do not know what these home schoolers’ test scores would have been if they had been taught in public



*Over a million U.S. students are homeschooled, including these two brothers in Maple Grove, Minnesota, who are taught by their mother.*

schools. With their parents’ involvement in their education, they likely would have done very well there, too. In addition, although the Rudner study was large, it was not a random sample, and we cannot say how the *average* home schooler is doing. But, then, we have no random sample of all public school students, either.

What about the children’s social skills? Since they don’t attend school with dozens and even hundreds of other students, do they become social misfits? The studies show that they do just fine on this level, too, that they even have fewer behavior problems than children who attend conventional schools (Lines 2000). Contrary to stereotypes, home-schooled children are not isolated. As part of their educational experience, their parents take them to libraries, museums, factories, and nursing homes (Medlin 2000). Some home schoolers also participate in the physical education and sports programs of the public schools. For social activities, many of the children meet with other homeschooled children and go on field trips together. Parents have also formed regional and national home-schooling associations and hold national sports championships (Cooper and Sureau 2007; Drape 2008). The same companies that sell class rings to public high schools also sell class rings to home schoolers (McGinn and McLure 2003).

How about getting into college? How can home-schooled children be admitted without official transcripts? This has been a problem, but as homeschooling has become widespread, colleges have adjusted. Now three of four colleges have procedures for admitting home schoolers (Cooper and Sureau 2007).

### For Your Consideration

Why do you think that home schooling has become so popular? Do you think this social movement could eventually become a threat to U.S. public schools? Would you consider home schooling your children? Why or why not?



**A Surprising Latent Function.** Researchers have found a surprising effect of education: On average, the farther that people go in school, the longer they live. Americans who drop out of high school live to an average age of 75, but those who go beyond high school live to an average age of 82 (Meara et al. 2008). The most likely reasons are that the more educated live healthier (better diets and less smoking) and have better jobs, higher pay, and superior medical services.

**hidden curriculum** the unwritten goals of schools, such as teaching obedience to authority and conformity to cultural norms

## The Conflict Perspective: Perpetuating Social Inequality

Unlike functionalists, who look at the benefits of education, conflict theorists examine how *the educational system reproduces the social class structure*. By this, they mean that schools perpetuate the social divisions of society and help members of the elite to maintain their dominance.

Let's look, then, at how education is related to social classes, how it helps people inherit the life opportunities that were laid down before they were born.

### The Hidden Curriculum

The term **hidden curriculum** refers to the attitudes and the unwritten rules of behavior that schools teach in addition to the formal curriculum. Examples are obedience to authority and conformity to mainstream norms. Conflict theorists stress that the hidden curriculum helps to perpetuate social inequalities.

To understand this central point, consider the way English is taught. Schools for the middle class—whose teachers know where their students are headed—stress “proper” English and “good” manners. In contrast, the teachers in inner-city schools—who also know where *their* students are headed—allow ethnic and street language in the classroom. Each type of school is helping to reproduce the social class structure. That is, each is preparing students to work in positions similar to those of their parents. The social class of some children destines them for higher positions. For these jobs, they need “refined” speech and manners. The social destiny of others is low-status jobs. For this type of work, they need only to obey rules (Bowles and Gintis 1976; 2002). Teaching these students “refined” speech and manners would be a wasted effort. In other words, even the teaching of English and manners helps keep the social classes intact across generations.

From the conflict perspective, even kindergarten has a hidden curriculum, as the Down-to-Earth Sociology box on the next page illustrates.

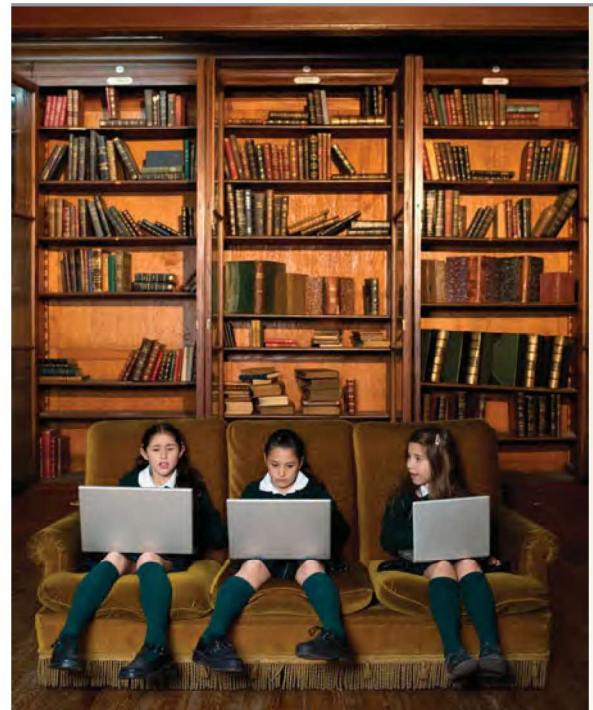
### Tilting the Tests: Discrimination by IQ

Even intelligence tests help to keep the social class system intact. Let's look at an example. How would you answer this question?

A symphony is to a composer as a book is to a(n) \_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_ paper \_\_\_\_ sculptor \_\_\_\_ musician \_\_\_\_ author \_\_\_\_ man

You probably had no difficulty coming up with “author” as your choice. Wouldn't any intelligent person have done so?

In point of fact, this question raises a central issue in intelligence testing. Not all intelligent people would know the answer. This question contains *cultural biases*. Children from some backgrounds



Stressing that education reproduces a country's social class system, conflict theorists point out that the social classes attend separate schools. There they learn perspectives of the world that match their place in it. Shown here are students at a private school in Argentina. What do you think this school's *hidden curriculum* is?



## Down-to-Earth Sociology

### Kindergarten as Boot Camp

After he did participant observation in a kindergarten, sociologist Harry Gracey (1991/2007) concluded that kindergarten is a sort of boot camp for education. Here, tender students from diverse backgrounds are molded into a compliant group that will, on command, follow classroom routines. “Show and tell,” for example, does more than allow children to be expressive. It also teaches them to talk only when they are asked to speak. (“It’s your turn, Jarmay.”) The format instructs children to request permission to talk (“Who knows what Adela has?”) by raising a hand and being acknowledged. This ritual also teaches children to acknowledge the teacher’s ideas as superior. She alone has the capacity to evaluate what students say and do.

Gracey also found a *hidden curriculum* in other activities he observed. Whether students were drawing pictures, listening to music, eating snacks, or resting, the teachers would scold talkative students and give approval to those who conformed. In short, the children received the message that the teacher—and, by inference, the entire school system—is the authority.

This, Gracey concluded, is not a side issue—it is *the* purpose of kindergarten. The kindergarten teacher’s job is to teach children to “follow orders with unquestioning obedience.” It is to “create and enforce a rigid social structure in the classroom through which they effectively control the behavior of most of the children for most of the school day.”

This produces three kinds of students: (1) “good” students, those who submit to school-imposed discipline and come to identify with it; (2) “adequate”



students, those who submit to the school’s discipline but do not identify with it; and (3) “bad” students, those who refuse to submit to school routines. Children in the third category are called “problem children.” To bring them into line, tougher drill sergeants—the principal and the school psychologist—are called in. If that doesn’t work, the problem children are drugged into docility with Ritalin.

These early lessons extend beyond the classroom. As Gracey notes, school serves as a boot camp to prepare students for the routines of the work world, both on the assembly line and at the office. School helps turn children into docile workers who follow the routines imposed by “the company.”

### For Your Consideration

Gracey has a negative reaction to teaching so much discipline in kindergarten. What is your reaction? How else can schools exist if students don’t listen quietly to their teachers? What would happen if students didn’t learn obedience to authority early and later questioned what they were being taught?

are more familiar with the concepts of symphonies, composers, and sculptors than are other children. Consequently, the test is tilted in their favor.

To make the bias clearer, try to answer this question:

If you throw two dice and “7” is showing on the top, what is facing down?

\_\_\_ seven \_\_\_ snake eyes \_\_\_ box cars \_\_\_ little Joes \_\_\_ eleven

Adrian Dove (n.d.), a social worker in Watts, a poor area of Los Angeles, suggested this question. Its cultural bias should be obvious—that it allows children from certain social backgrounds to perform better than others. Unlike the first question, this one is not tilted to the middle-class experience. In other words, IQ (intelligence quotient) tests measure not only intelligence but also acquired knowledge.

You should now be able to perceive the bias of IQ tests that use such words as *composer* and *symphony*. A lower-class child may have heard about rap, rock, gangsta, or jazz, but not about symphonies. One consequence of this bias to the middle-class experience is that the children of the poor score lower on IQ tests. Then, to match their

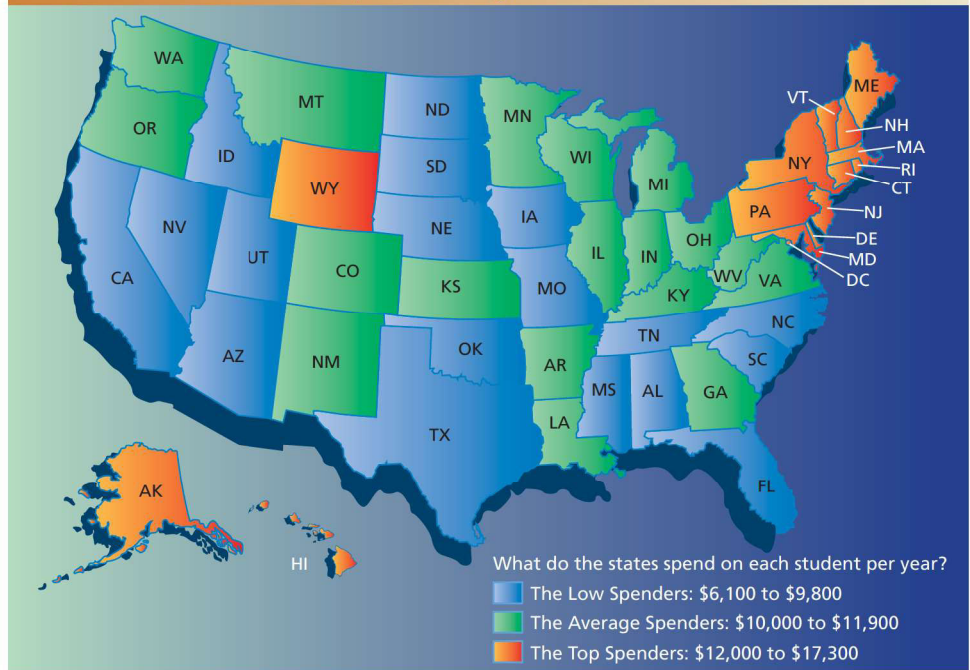


supposedly inferior intelligence, these children are assigned to less demanding courses. Their inferior education helps them reach their social destiny, their lower-paying jobs in adult life. As conflict theorists view them, then, IQ tests are another weapon in an arsenal designed to maintain the social class structure across the generations.

### Stacking the Deck: Unequal Funding

As you can see from the Social Map at right, the amount spent on educating children varies widely among the states. Although there is no one-for-one match, in general, the states that spend more on education have higher quality schools. A main reason is that they attract more highly qualified teachers. Conflict theorists go beyond this, however, and stress the significance of *how* U.S. schools are funded. Because public schools are supported largely by local property taxes, the richer communities (where property values and incomes are higher) have more to spend on their children, and the poorer communities have less to spend on theirs. Consequently, the richer communities can offer higher salaries and take their pick of the most highly qualified and motivated teachers. They can also afford to buy the latest textbooks, computers, and software, as well as offer courses in foreign languages, music, and the arts. This, stress conflict theorists, means that in *all* states the deck is stacked against the poor.

**FIGURE 17.4** The Unequal Funding of Education



*Note:* Some states spend more than twice as much to educate their students. The range is from \$6,100 in Arizona to \$17,300 in Vermont. At \$19,100, the District of Columbia is in a class by itself.

*Source:* By the author. Based on *Statistical Abstract of the United States 2011*: Table 258.

### The Correspondence Principle

In a classic analysis, conflict sociologists Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (1976, 2002) used the term **correspondence principle** to refer to how schools reflect society. This term means that what is taught in a nation's schools *corresponds* to the characteristics of that society. Here are some examples.

#### Characteristics of Society

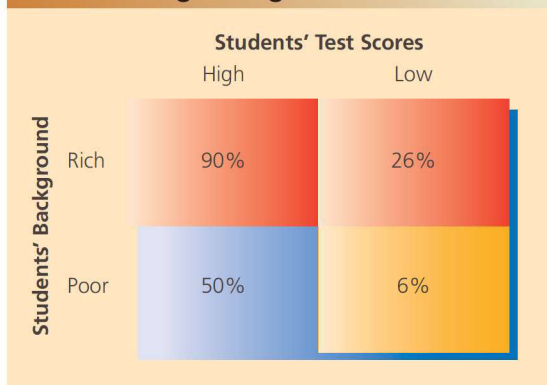
1. Capitalism
2. Social inequality
3. Social class bias
4. Bureaucratic structure of corporations
5. Need for submissive workers
6. Need for dependable workers
7. Need to maintain armed forces

#### Characteristics of Schools

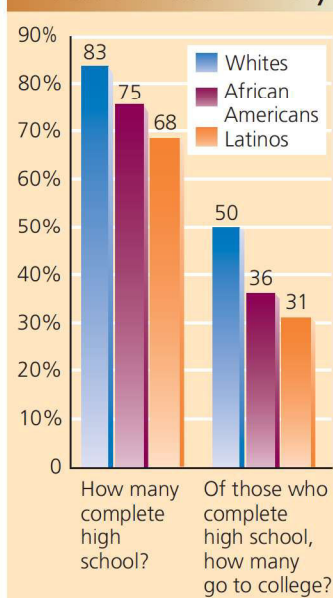
1. Encourage competition
2. Unequal funding of schools
3. Funnel children of the poor into job training programs that demand little thinking
4. Provide a model of authority in the classroom
5. Make students submissive, as in the kindergarten boot camp
6. Enforce punctuality in attendance and homework
7. Promote patriotism

**correspondence principle** the sociological principle that schools correspond to (or reflect) the social structure of their society



**FIGURE 17.5 Who Goes to College?**  
Comparing Social Class and Ability in Determining College Attendance

Source: Bowles 1977.

**FIGURE 17.6 The Funneling Effects of Education: Race-Ethnicity**

Note: The source gives totals only for these three groups.

Source: By the author. Based on *Statistical Abstract of the United States 2011*:Table 269.

Conflict theorists conclude that the correspondence principle demonstrates that the U.S. educational system is designed to turn students into dependable workers who will not question their bosses. It also is intended to produce some who are innovators in thought and action, but who can still be counted on to be loyal to the social system as it exists (Olneck and Bills 1980).

## The Bottom Line: Family Background

The end result of unequal funding, IQ tests, and the other factors we have discussed is this: Family background is more important than test scores in predicting who attends college. In a classic study, sociologist Samuel Bowles (1977) compared the college attendance of the brightest 25 percent of high school students with that of the intellectually weakest 25 percent. Figure 17.5 shows the results. Of the *brightest* 25 percent of high school students, 90 percent of those from affluent homes went to college, while only half of those from low-income homes did. Of the *intellectually weakest* students, 26 percent from affluent homes went to college, while only 6 percent from poorer homes did so.

Other sociologists have confirmed this classic research. Anthony Carnevale and Stephen Rose (2003) compared students' college attendance with their intellectual abilities and their parents' social class. Regardless of personal abilities, children from more well-to-do families are more likely not only to go to college but also to attend the nation's most elite schools. This, in turn, piles advantage upon advantage, because they get higher-paying and more prestigious jobs when they graduate. The elite colleges are the icing on the cake of these students' more privileged birth.

Conflict theorists point out that the educational system reproduces not only the U.S. social class structure but also its racial-ethnic divisions. From Figure 17.6, you can see that, compared with whites, African Americans and Latinos are much less likely to complete high school and, of those who do, much less likely to go to college. Because adults without college degrees usually end up with low-paying, dead-end jobs, you can see how this supports the conflict view—that education is helping to reproduce the racial-ethnic structure for the next generation.

Table 17.1 below gives us another snapshot of the significance of race-ethnicity and college attendance. From this table, you can see that whites are the most likely to attend four-year colleges, which supports the conflict perspective. But you can also see that African Americans are the most likely to attend private colleges, which does not support this perspective. You can also see, however, that Latinos and Native Americans are less likely to attend private colleges. This, coupled with their being less likely to attend college in the first place, helps to perpetuate some of society's racial-ethnic divisions.

**In Sum:** U.S. schools closely reflect the U.S. social class system. They equip the children of the elite with the tools they need to maintain their dominance, while they prepare the children of the poor for lower-status positions. Because education's doors of opportunity swing wide open for some but have to be pried open by others, conflict theorists say that the educational system perpetuates social inequality across generations (or, as they often phrase it, helps to reproduce the social class structure). In fact, they add, this is one of its primary purposes.

**TABLE 17.1** Types of College and Race-Ethnicity

|                   | Public | Private | 2-Year | 4-Year |
|-------------------|--------|---------|--------|--------|
| Whites            | 73%    | 27%     | 34%    | 66%    |
| African Americans | 68%    | 32%     | 40%    | 60%    |
| Asian Americans   | 75%    | 25%     | 37%    | 63%    |
| Latinos           | 81%    | 19%     | 52%    | 48%    |
| Native Americans  | 80%    | 20%     | 44%    | 56%    |

Source: By the author. Based on *Statistical Abstract of the United States 2011*:Table 275.



## The Symbolic Interactionist Perspective: Teacher Expectations

Functionalists look at how education benefits society, and conflict theorists examine how education perpetuates social inequality. Symbolic interactionists, in contrast, study face-to-face interaction in the classroom. They have found that the expectations of teachers have profound consequences for their students.

### The Rist Research

Why do some people get tracked into college prep courses and others into vocational ones? There is no single answer, but in what has become a classic study, sociologist Ray Rist came up with some intriguing findings. Rist (1970, 2000) did participant observation in an African American grade school with an African American faculty. He found that after only eight days in the classroom, the kindergarten teacher felt that she knew the children's abilities well enough to assign them to three separate worktables. To Table 1, Mrs. Caplow assigned those she considered to be "fast learners." They sat at the front of the room, closest to her. Those whom she saw as "slow learners," she assigned to Table 3, located at the back of the classroom. She placed "average" students at Table 2, in between the other tables.

This seemed strange to Rist. He knew that the children had not been tested for ability, yet their teacher was certain that she could identify the bright and slow children. Investigating further, Rist found that social class was the underlying basis for assigning the children to the different tables. Middle-class students were separated out for Table 1, and children from poorer homes were assigned to Tables 2 and 3. The teacher paid the most attention to the children at Table 1, who were closest to her, less to Table 2, and the least to Table 3. As the year went on, children from Table 1 perceived that they were treated better and came to see themselves as smarter. They became the leaders in class activities and even ridiculed children at the other tables, calling them "dumb." Eventually, the children at Table 3 disengaged themselves from many classroom activities. At the end of the year, only the children at Table 1 had completed the lessons that prepared them for reading.

This early tracking stuck. Their first-grade teacher looked at the work these students had done, and she placed students from Table 1 at her Table 1. She treated her tables much as the kindergarten teacher had, and the children at Table 1 again led the class.

The children's reputations continued to follow them. The second-grade teacher reviewed their scores and also divided her class into three groups. The first she named the "Tigers" and, befitting their name, gave them challenging readers. Not surprisingly, the Tigers came from the original Table 1 in kindergarten. The second group she called the "Cardinals." They came from the original Tables 2 and 3. Her third group consisted of children she had failed the previous year, whom she called the "Clowns." The Cardinals and Clowns were given less advanced readers.

Rist concluded that *each child's journey through school was determined by the eighth day of kindergarten!* As we saw with the Saints and Roughnecks, in Chapter 4, labels can be so powerful that they can set people on courses of action that affect the rest of their lives.



Education can be a dangerous thing. Socrates, who taught in Greece about 400 years before the birth of Christ, was forced to take poison because his views challenged those of the establishment. Usually, however, educators reinforce the perspectives of the elite, teaching students to take their place within the social structure. This 1787 painting, "The Death of Socrates," is by J. L. David (1748–1825).



What occurred was a **self-fulfilling prophecy**. This term, coined by sociologist Robert Merton (1949/1968), refers to a false assumption of something that is going to happen but which then comes true simply because it was predicted. For example, if people believe an unfounded rumor that a credit union is going to fail because its officers have embezzled their money, they all rush to the credit union to demand their money. The prediction—although originally false—is now likely to come true.

## The Rosenthal-Jacobson Experiment

Let's look at another classic example of the self-fulfilling prophecy in education. This one, too, holds some surprises. All of us know about teacher expectations—that some teachers have higher standards and expect work of a higher quality. Teacher expectations, however, also work at a very subtle level. In a famous experiment, social psychologists Robert Rosenthal and Lenore Jacobson (1968) told the teachers in a San Francisco grade school that they had developed a predictive test of children's abilities. After testing their students, they told them which students would probably "spurt" ahead during the year. They told the teachers to watch these students' progress, but not to let the students or their parents know about the test results. At the end of the year, they tested the students again. As they predicted, the "spurters" had spurted: Their IQs had jumped ten to fifteen points!

Did Rosenthal and Jacobson become world-famous for developing a powerful scholastic aptitude test? Actually, they hadn't developed any test at all, much less something this astounding. They had just done another of those covert experiments. They had given routine IQ tests to the children and then had *randomly* chosen 20 percent of the students as "spurters." These students were *no* different from their classmates. The "spurting," though, was real. What had happened was a self-fulfilling prophecy: The teachers expected more from those particular students, and responding to subtle cues, these students learned more and performed better on the tests.

A good deal of research confirms that, *regardless of their abilities*, students who are expected to do better generally do better, and those who are expected to do poorly do poorly (Rosenthal 1998; McKown and Weinstein 2002, 2008). In short, expect dumb and you get dumb. Expect smart, and you get smart.

## How Do Teacher Expectations Work?

Sociologist George Farkas (1990a, 1990b, 1996) became interested in how teacher expectations affect grades. Using a stratified sample of students in a large school district in Texas, he found that teacher expectations produced gender and racial-ethnic biases. *On the gender level*: Even though boys and girls had the same test scores, girls on average were given higher course grades. *On the racial-ethnic level*: Asian Americans who had the same test scores as the other groups averaged higher grades than did African Americans, Latinos, and whites.

At first, this may sound like more of the same old news—another case of discrimination. But this explanation doesn't fit, which is what makes the finding fascinating. Look at who the victims are. It is most unlikely that the teachers would be prejudiced against boys and whites. To interpret these unexpected results, Farkas used symbolic interactionism. He observed that some students "signal" to their teachers that they are "good students." They show an eagerness to cooperate, and they quickly agree with what the teacher says. They also show that they are "trying hard." The teachers pick up these signals and reward these "good students" with better grades. Girls and Asian Americans, the researcher concluded, are better at giving these signals so coveted by teachers.

We do not have enough information on how teachers communicate their expectations to students. Nor do we know much about how students "signal" messages to teachers. Perhaps you will become the educational sociologist who will shed more light on this significant area of human behavior.

### self-fulfilling prophecy

Robert Merton's term for an originally false assertion that becomes true simply because it was predicted



## Problems in U.S. Education—and Their Solutions

Now that we've looked at some of the dynamics within the classroom, let's turn to three problems facing U.S. education—mediocrity, cheating, and violence—and consider their potential solutions.

### Mediocrity

**The Rising Tide of Mediocrity.** Since I know you love taking tests, let's see how you do on these three questions:

1. How many goals are on a basketball court? a. 1 b. 2 c. 3 d. 4
2. How many halves are in a college basketball game? a. 1 b. 2 c. 3 d. 4
3. How many points does a three-point field goal account for in a basketball game?  
a. 1 b. 2 c. 3 d. 4

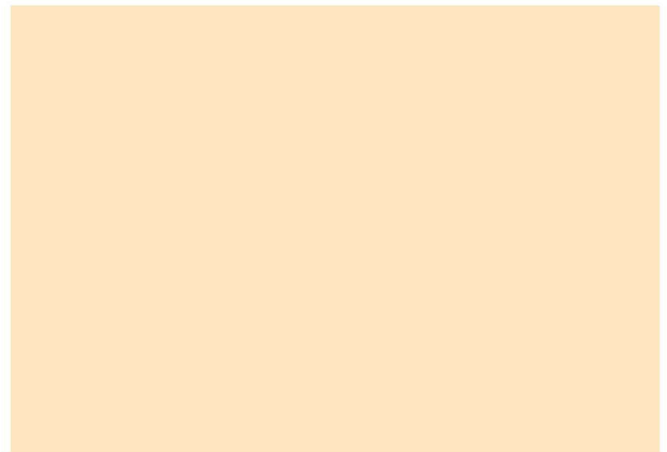
I know that this sounds like a joke, but it isn't. Sociologist Robert Benford (2007) got his hands on a copy of a 20-question final examination given to basketball players who took a credit course on coaching principles at the University of Georgia. It is usually difficult to refer to athletes, sports, and academics in the same breath, but this is about as mediocre as mediocrity can get.

Let's move to a broader view of mediocrity, which plagues our educational system like pollution plagues gasoline engines:

- All Arizona high school sophomores took a math test. As you would expect, the test covered the math that sophomores should know. *One of ten passed.*
- In Tennessee, state officials were so pleased at *their* test results that they called a news conference. They boasted that 87 percent of their students were proficient at math—and they had the test results to prove it. When the federal government retested the students, the results dropped just a bit—to 21 percent (Dillon 2005b).
- These are appalling conditions, but the situation gets worse. Schools have reduced their standards so greatly that only *34 percent* of U.S. high school graduates are ready for college (Greene and Winters 2005).

How about our SAT tests? How are we doing on them? The news is mixed. First the good news. Look at Figure 17.7. You can see how the scores dropped from the 1960s to 1980. At that point, educators sounded an alarm—and even Congress expressed concern. School officials decided that they had better do something if they didn't want to lose their jobs. They raised their standards, and the SAT scores started to climb. The recovery in math is encouraging. Today's high school seniors now score the same in math as seniors did in the 1960s. Administrators are requiring more of teachers, and teachers are requiring more of students. Each is performing according to these higher expectations.

But then there is the bad news. Look at the verbal scores on Figure 17.7. Their drop from the 1960s was even larger than the drop in math, and they have not recovered. No one knows why these scores remain so low, but the usual suspects are rounded up: "dummied down" textbooks, less rigorous teaching, and less reading because of watching television and playing video and computer games. Today's





students perform so poorly that they couldn't handle analogies, which demand penetrating thinking. Rather than facing the bad news—which might force schools to do a better job of teaching, as they did with math—the makers of the SAT took the easy way out: They avoided embarrassment by eliminating the analogy part of the test.

**How to Cheat on the SATs.** If you receive poor grades this semester, wouldn't you like to use a magic marker—to—presto!—change them into higher grades? I suppose every student would. Now imagine that you had that power. Would you use it?

Some people in authority apparently have found such a magic marker, and they have used it to raise our low national SAT scores. Table 274 of the 1996 edition of the *Statistical Abstract of the United States* reports that in 1995 only 8.3 percent of students earned 600 or more on the verbal portion of the SAT test. The very next edition, in 1997, however, holds a pleasant surprise. Table 276 tells us that it was really 21.9 percent of students who scored 600 or higher in 1995. Later editions of this source retain the higher figure. What a magic marker!

In the twinkle of an eye, we get another bonus. Somehow, between 1996 and 1997 the scores of *everyone* who took the test in previous years improved. Now that's the kind of power we all would like to have. Students, grab your report cards. Workers, change those numbers on your paycheck.

It certainly is easier to give easier tests than to teach more effectively. And this is what has happened to the SAT. The results were so embarrassing to U.S. educators that the SAT was made easier. Not only was testing on antonyms and analogies dropped, but the test was also shortened and students were given more time to answer the fewer questions. The test makers then “rescored” the totals of previous years to match the easier test. This “dummying down” of the SAT is a form of grade inflation, the topic to which we shall now turn.

**Grade Inflation, Social Promotion, and Functional Illiteracy.** The letter grade C used to indicate average, and since more students are average than superior, high school teachers used to give about twice as many C's as A's. Now they give more A's than C's. Students aren't smarter—grading is just easier. Grades have become so inflated that some of today's A's are the C's of years past. **Grade inflation** is so pervasive that 48 percent of all college freshmen have an overall high school grade point average of A. This is more than *twice* what it was in 1970 (*Statistical Abstract* 2011:Table 281). Grade inflation has also hit the Ivy League. At Harvard University, *half* of the course grades are A's and A-'s. *Ninety* percent of Harvard students graduate with honors. To rein in “honor inflation,” the Harvard faculty voted to limit the number of students who graduate with honors to 60 percent of a class (Hartocollis 2002; Douthat 2005).

Easy grades and declining standards have been accompanied by **social promotion**, passing students from one grade to the next even though they have not learned the basic materials. One result is **functional illiteracy**, high school graduates who never mastered even things they should have learned in grade school. They even have difficulty with reading and writing. Some high school graduates can't fill out job applications; others can't even figure out whether they get the right change at the grocery store.

## Higher Standards

**Raising Standards for Teachers.** It is one thing to identify problems, quite another to find solutions for them. How can we solve mediocrity? To offer a quality education, we need quality teachers. Don't we already have them? Most teachers are qualified and, if motivated, can do an excellent job. But a large number of teachers are not qualified. Consider just a couple of items. California requires that its teachers pass an educational skills test. California's teachers did so poorly that to get enough teachers to fill their classrooms, officials had to drop the passing grade to the 10th-grade level. These are college graduates who are teachers—and they are expected to perform at the 10th-grade level (Schemo 2002). I don't know about you, but I think this situation is a national disgrace. If we want to improve teaching, we need to insist that teachers meet high standards.

Our schools compete with private industry for the same pool of college graduates. If the starting salary in other fields is higher than it is in education, those fields will attract brighter, more energetic graduates. Figure 17.8 on the next page highlights the abysmal job we are doing in this competition for talent. Despite this, however, there is a shimmer of good news.

**grade inflation** higher grades given for the same work; a general rise in student grades without a corresponding increase in learning

**social promotion** passing students on to the next level even though they have not mastered basic materials

**functional illiterate** a high school graduate who has difficulty with basic reading and math



The SAT scores of those who are joining the ranks of teachers are climbing, and the average new teacher is now more qualified than those who began teaching several years ago (Gitomer 2007).

### Raising Standards for Students.

What else can we do to improve the quality of education? An older study by sociologists James Coleman and Thomas Hoffer (1987) provides helpful guidelines. They wanted to see why the test scores of students in Roman Catholic schools average 15 to 20 percent higher than those of students in public schools. Is it because Catholic schools attract better students, while public schools have to put up with everyone?

To find out, they tested 15,000 students in public and Catholic high schools.

Their findings? From the sophomore through the senior years, students at Catholic schools pull ahead of public school students by a full grade in verbal and math skills. The superior test performance of students in Catholic schools, they concluded, is due not to better students, but to higher standards. Catholic schools have not watered down their curricula as have public schools. The researchers also underscored the importance of parental involvement. Parents and teachers in Catholic schools reinforce each other's commitment to learning.

These findings support the basic principle reviewed earlier about teacher expectations: Students perform better when they are expected to meet higher standards. To this, you might want to reply, "Of course. I knew that. Who wouldn't?" Somehow, however, this basic principle is lost on many teachers, who end up teaching at a low level because they expect little of their students and have supervisors who accept low student performance. The reason, actually, is probably not their lack of awareness of such basics, but, rather, the organization that entraps them, a bureaucracy in which ritual replaces performance. To understand this point better, you may want to review Chapter 7.

**A Warning About Higher Standards.** If we raise standards, we can expect protest. It is less upsetting to use low standards and to tell students that they are doing well than it is to do rigorous teaching and use high standards to measure student performance. When Florida decided that its high school seniors needed to pass an assessment test in order to receive a diploma, 13,000 students failed the test. Parents of failed students banded together—not to demand better teaching but to pressure the state to drop the new test. They asked people to boycott Disney World and to not buy Florida orange juice (Canedy 2003). What positive steps to improve their children's learning!

Let's look at a second problem in education.

**FIGURE 17.8** Starting Salaries of U.S. College Graduates, BA or BS Degree: Public School Teachers Compared with Private Industry



Note: Starting salaries for BA or BS degree.

Sources: By the author. Based on American Federation of Teachers 2008; Statistical Abstract of the United States 2011: Table 294.



On average, students in Roman Catholic schools score higher on national tests than students in public schools. Is it because Roman Catholic schools have better students, or because they do better teaching? The text reports the sociological findings.



## Cheating

I'm not referring to the cheating you saw in your social studies or mathematics class in high school. I'm referring to cheating by *school administrators*. Listen to this:

Mississippi keeps two sets of books: In the one, statisticians crunch numbers and record the state's graduation rate at 87 percent. For its second set of books, statisticians crunch numbers and report that just 63 percent of its students graduate. They report the 87 percent rate to Washington. California does the same. Its totals are 83 percent and 67 percent. So do other states. (Dillon 2008)

As strange and as disappointing as it sounds, it turns out that high school administrators across the nation have been faking their graduation rates. Why are they cheating like this? What kind of an example is this to students?

It is an amazingly poor example at best, and it needs to be exposed for what it is. The reason for this cheating is that federal agencies publish these reports, and states don't want to look bad. Also, the government might reduce the money states get from Washington. It's like a girl telling her parents that she received a B in English when she really received a D. She didn't want to disappoint her parents, and her allowance might be cut.

The school administrators are quite creative in producing their fake numbers. One way is to count the number of students who begin their senior year, and report the percentage of those seniors who graduate. This conveniently overlooks all their dropouts in the freshman, sophomore and junior years. It also has a perverse effect. Some administrators encourage high school students who are doing poorly to drop out before they reach their senior year. This way, they won't be counted as dropouts (Dillon 2008).

The solution to this problem is fairly simple. Develop a straightforward measurement of high school graduation and require all states to follow it. A simple measure is to compare the number of those who graduate from high school with those who entered high school in the ninth grade four years earlier, minus those who died and those who transferred out plus those who transferred in. Federal officials could spot-check records across the nation, publicize the names of any administrators who cheated on computing the rate, and make certain they were fired and could not receive another job in education for a minimum of five years. It is likely that honesty in reporting would jump immediately. Real graduation rates would help pinpoint where the problems are, helping us to know where to focus solutions. If you don't know where its broken, you don't know where to fix it.

Let's turn to the third problem.

## Violence

Some U.S. schools have deteriorated to the point that safety is an issue. In these schools, uniformed guards and metal detectors have become permanent fixtures. Everywhere, school officials fear that "it could happen here." In an era of bomb threats and armed, roaming sociopaths, some states now require lockdown, or "Code Blue," drills: The classrooms—each equipped with a phone—are locked, the windows are locked, and the shades are drawn. The students are told to remain absolutely silent, while a school official wanders the halls, like an armed intruder, listening for the slightest sound that would indicate that someone was in a classroom (Kelley 2008).

School shootings are a national concern. For a surprising analysis of deaths at school, read the Mass Media box on the next page.

**A Secure Learning Environment.** The first step in offering a good education is to keep students safe and free from fear. With the high rate of violence in the United States, we can expect some violence to spill over into the schools. To minimize this spillover, school administrators can expel all students who threaten the welfare of others. They also can refuse to tolerate threats, violence, and weapons. The zero tolerance policy for guns and other weapons on school property that school boards and administrators have adopted helps to make schools safer.



# MASS MEDIA In SOCIAL LIFE

## School Shootings: Exploring a Myth

**T**he media sprinkle their reports of school shootings with such dramatic phrases as “alarming proportions,” “outbreak of violence,” and “out of control.” They give us the impression that wackos walk our hallways, ready to spray our schools with gunfire. Parents used to consider schools safe havens, but no longer. Those naïve thoughts have been shattered by the bullets that have ripped through schools—or at least by the media’s portrayal of growing danger and violence in our schools.

Have our schools really become war zones, as the mass media would have us believe? Certainly events such as those at Columbine High School and Virginia Tech are disturbing, but we need to probe deeper than newspaper headlines and televised images.

When we do, we find that the media’s sensationalist reporting has created a myth. Contrary to “what everyone knows,” *there is no trend toward greater school violence*. In fact, the situation is just the opposite—the *trend is toward greater safety*. Despite the dramatic school shootings that make headlines, as Table 17.2 shows, shooting deaths at schools are *decreasing*. The average number of annual shooting deaths for 1992 to 1999 is 30, which is *twice as high as the annual average of 15 for 2000 to 2007*.

This is not to say that school shootings are not a serious problem. Even one student being wounded or killed is too many. But, contrary to the impression fostered by the media, school shooting deaths have dropped sharply.

This is one reason that we need sociology: to quietly, dispassionately search for facts so we can better understand the events that shape our lives. The first requirement for solving any problem is accurate data, for how can we create rational solutions that are based on hysteria? The information presented in this box may not make for sensational headlines, but it does serve to explode one of the myths that the media have created.



*This frame from a home video shows Eric Harris (on the left) and Dylan Klebold (on the right) as they pretend that they are searching for victims. They put their desires into practice in the infamous Columbine High School shootings.*

### For Your Consideration

How do you think we can reduce school shootings?  
How about school violence of any sort?

**TABLE 17.2** Exploding a Myth: Deaths at U.S. Schools<sup>1</sup>

| School Year     | Shooting Deaths | Other Deaths <sup>2</sup> | VICTIMS |       | Total |
|-----------------|-----------------|---------------------------|---------|-------|-------|
|                 |                 |                           | Boys    | Girls |       |
| 1992–1993       | 45              | 11                        | 49      | 7     | 56    |
| 1993–1994       | 41              | 12                        | 41      | 12    | 53    |
| 1994–1995       | 16              | 5                         | 18      | 3     | 21    |
| 1995–1996       | 29              | 7                         | 26      | 10    | 36    |
| 1996–1997       | 15              | 11                        | 18      | 8     | 26    |
| 1997–1998       | 36              | 8                         | 27      | 17    | 44    |
| 1998–1999       | 25              | 6                         | 24      | 7     | 31    |
| 1999–2000       | 16              | 16                        | 26      | 6     | 32    |
| 2000–2001       | 19              | 5                         | 20      | 4     | 24    |
| 2001–2002       | 4               | 2                         | 6       | 0     | 6     |
| 2002–2003       | 14              | 8                         | 16      | 6     | 22    |
| 2003–2004       | 29              | 13                        | 37      | 5     | 42    |
| 2004–2005       | 20              | 8                         | 20      | 8     | 28    |
| 2005–2006       | 5               | 0                         | 4       | 1     | 5     |
| 2006–2007       | 16              | 4                         | 13      | 7     | 20    |
| Total 1992–2007 | 330             | 114                       | 343     | 101   | 446   |
| Mean 1992–2007  | 22.0            | 7.6                       | 22.9    | 6.7   | 29.6  |

<sup>1</sup>Includes all school-related homicides, even those that occurred on the way to or from school. Includes suicides, school personnel killed at school by other adults, and even adults who had nothing to do with the school but who were found dead on school property. Source does not report on deaths at colleges, only K–12 (kindergarten through high school).

<sup>2</sup>Beating, hanging, jumping, stabbing, slashing, strangling, or heart attack.

Source: By the author. Based on National School Safety Center 2009.



## The Future of Education

Most of the changes that administrators make consist of minor adjustments to the current system of education: giving this test or that test, measuring progress this way or that way, requiring more memorization or less memorization, providing a core curriculum or more diversity, emphasizing more or less the contributions of minorities to mainstream culture, motivating teachers and students by this carrot or that carrot. All might be important in their own way, but each is a minute adjustment to the details of an existing—and flawed—system. In the meantime, technology is transforming education, changing what we learn and the way we learn it. To conclude the chapter, let's consider this major change.

### SOCIOLOGY and the NEW TECHNOLOGY

#### Internet University: No Walls, No Ivy, No All Night Parties

Distance learning, courses taught to students who are not physically present with their instructor, is not new. For decades, we have had correspondence courses. Today, however, telecommunications have transformed distance learning. Satellites, computers, and video cameras are making cyber colleges part of mainstream education. Using video links, students are able to watch the professor on their screen. Clicking an icon, they can “raise their hands” to ask questions. Networking programs let the instructor know who is e-mailing others—and who is holding back. Tucked deeper in the software is a program that allows deans (supervisors) to scrutinize the instructors. The deans get reports, for example, that let them know how long it takes instructors to answer e-mail from students.

Broadening the experience of both students and instructors through cultural diversity is one of the

interesting potentials of distance learning. Students can enjoy stimulating international experiences without leaving the country. For example, sociology professors at the State University of New York and the State University of Belarus (Minsk, Russia) jointly taught an online course on Social Control. Coming from such different political experiences, the American and Russian students found that the course opened their eyes to different perspectives (Beaman 2003).



*We may be seeing the beginning of technology's transformation of education. This avatar is of a teacher who is using Second Life to teach a required writing course at Ball State University. Students select their own avatars. They roam this virtual world, asking other inhabitants of Second Life about their feelings of identity and then write a weekly blog on their observations.*

Why should formal education be limited to walled classrooms? Think of the possibilities the Net opens to us. We could study human culture and compare notes on eating, dating, or burial customs with fellow students in Thailand, Iceland, South Africa, Germany, Egypt, China, and Australia. We could write a joint paper in which we compare our

experiences with one another, within the context of theories taught in the text, and then submit our paper to our mutual instructor.

Then there are students who don't fit in. They might not look like the “cool” students, and they certainly don't think like them. Some find school boring. Others find it a threatening place. For still others, an