Education

Learning Objectives

After having read chapter 12, you will be able to

- summarize the historical development of institutionalized education in Canada.
- distinguish among three central models of public education.
- explain the hidden curriculum using specific examples.
- compare and contrast Anyon's (1980) and Oakes's (2005) cultural reproduction approaches to education.
- define educational streaming or tracking and outline its implications.
- critically discuss key trends in contemporary education.

Chapter Summary

Education is one of the most important **institutions** in contemporary society. The institution of education is an enduring set of ideas about education and how it can be used to accomplish societal goals. Education influences our socialization, status, the social order, and economic productivity. At school, behaviours are modified, employment skills are developed, social interaction and conflict are negotiated, notions of social reality are defined, and structures of inequality are reproduced.

Before the Industrial Revolution, there was little interest in educating the masses. However, the Industrial Revolution demanded a more disciplined, trainable, and literate workforce. Industrialization and public education became interdependent with the rise of industrial capitalism. As early as 1846, education in Canada was seen as a means of achieving economic modernization. At that time, Egerton Ryerson promoted a universal, free, and compulsory school system. Writing over a century later, Stephen Schecter (1977) argued that state-run education was premised on centralization and uniformity, both of which were instruments of social control to be used on the emerging working class as well as means of assimilation of immigrants. Malacrida (2015) examined how compulsory education is used to enforce social subordination. She argues that education ranks and sorts children to the detriment of those considered inferior by ways of truancy laws, tests and curriculums that standardize expectations of educational success, and "Health" testing conducted via medical and psychological examinations.

The need for a more educated workforce after World War II led to the expansion of colleges and universities across Canada. The perceived relationship between educational expansion and economic growth forms part of the **human capital thesis**, which suggests that industrial societies invest in factories, equipment, and schools to enhance the skills and knowledge of their workers. This thesis is used to justify the low wages paid to marginalized groups by claiming that they have less human capital (i.e., education, skills, and knowledge).

Since the 1970s, decreasing corporate taxes have led to reduced government budgets and thus cuts in funding of post-secondary institutions. As a result, colleges and universities have turned to corporations for financial support. This relationship has created some potentially problematic changes to post-secondary education. For example, we see increasing advertising on campuses and academic research has become more closely tied to corporate agendas and control.

The Canadian educational system has been based on three models over the years. Initially, **assimilation** was the dominant approach to education. English Canada was viewed as a white Protestant nation into which all students, regardless of background, would be assimilated. This **monocultural** approach continues today, foregrounding British culture as superior to others. However, this model fails to recognize racial bias and discrimination inside and outside the school system.

The second model was multiculturalism, which was officially implemented by the Canadian federal government in 1971 and aimed to preserve and promote cultural diversity. The multicultural model focuses mainly on studying and celebrating lifestyles, traditions, and histories of diverse cultures, such as differences in "food, festivals, and folklore." Multicultural education rests on three fundamental assumptions: (1) learning about one's culture will improve educational achievement; (2) learning about one's culture will promote equality of opportunity; and (3) learning about other cultures will reduce prejudice and discrimination. However, this approach promotes a simplistic focus on the "exotic" elements of culture and ignores values and beliefs fundamental to shaping cultural identity.

The third model is anti-racist and anti-oppression education, which emerged in the 1980s. This type of education acknowledges that systemic racial inequalities exist in Canada and seeks to expose and eliminate institutional barriers to equity. It aims to change institutional policies and practices as well as the individual attitudes and behaviours that reproduce social inequality.

While the education system is designed to provide members of society with relevant knowledge and skills, it also socializes them. It does so through the **hidden curriculum**—or the latent curriculum—which consists of the unstated, unofficial agenda of the education system. Robert Merton's structural functionalist theory helps us understand the hidden curriculum as performing the latent function of teaching societal norms. For example, the education system teaches us to value work, respect authority, and use time efficiently. However, conflict theorists might argue that the hidden curriculum is performing a latent dysfunction by, for example, reproducing the existing social class system.

Conflict theorists question whether education is a motor of social mobility and instead argue that education mainly serves **cultural reproduction**, by reinforcing and reproducing existing social inequality. To examine this concept, Jeannie Oakes (2005) researched tracking, or streaming, in junior and senior secondary schools. **Tracking** is defined as the process of categorizing students in order to assign them to different classes. This is generally done based on the student's perceived ability and desired educational outcome (e.g., university degree, a trade, clerical job). Oakes's research demonstrated that sorting was based as much on class, "race," and ethnicity as on

perceived ability. Oakes found that lower-class and non-white students were expected to achieve less and subsequently receive lower-quality education. Further, she found that instruction in lower-track classes was focused on routine and discipline (where teachers were more punitive), while instructional and learning activities were highlighted in higher-track classes (where teachers provided more trust-based, supportive interactions). Students who accept their tracking placements as "fair" **legitimize the inequality** reproduced by the education system.

Jean Anyon's research highlights the **reproduction of the social structure**, where the education system helps working-class children become working-class adults, middle-class children become middle-class adults and so on. Anyon studied five elementary schools and divided them into four categories: working class, middle class, affluent professional, and executive elite. She found that instruction in each type of school varied considerably, depending on the class-based expectations of the children. While working class students were mainly taught to obey the rules and were not encouraged to make independent decisions, students in executive elite schools were asked to reason through problems, conceptualize rules, and apply them to solve problems independently. These very different approaches to education prepare students in different schools for different career tracks.

The sociology of education studies challenges that emerge in the context of the education system. For example, studies of homework and its role in reproducing the existing class structure have shown that students from upper middle-class and upper-class homes have a distinct advantage. Their parents are better equipped to assist with homework (in terms of both time and formal educational background), and their homes contain quiet space and up-to-date technologies for doing homework. Further, studies of homework's impacts on family life have demonstrated that homework reduces the amount of time spent on family activities. Conflicts and power struggles over homework are also common, and thereby can have a negative effect on family relationships.

Several issues regarding education in Canada have emerged. One area of concern is Indigenous education. For example, the scarcity of Indigenous voices in curricular materials (e.g., textbooks), even those about Indigenous people, is a worrying trend. Foucault (1980) uses the term **disqualified knowledges** to describe knowledges that have been deemed inadequate to their task. Indigenous knowledge is frequently disqualified due to **credentialism**, whereby mainstream society values certificates, degrees, and diplomas over actual knowledge and ability. Consequently, the role of elders (who hold and pass on knowledge, wisdom, and skills to children and adults) is denigrated. Another issue involves Indigenous students' success rates in mainstream schools. A recent study completed in British Columbia schools identified five keys to Indigenous student success in non-Indigenous schools, but these have not been implemented yet.

Other discussions focus on issues in post-secondary education, which has changed dramatically over the last 30 years, mainly due to economic and social factors. An example of these changes is the increasing use of **adjunct faculty**. These instructors, most of whom have the same credentials as full-time faculty, are hired on a contractual or non-permanent basis. Adjunct faculty often teach courses that full-time instructors either can't or don't want to teach and allow institutions to save money on benefits, competitive salaries, and office space. A two-tiered system of faculty currently exists in Canada, with non-permanent faculty often exploited and placed in vulnerable positions vis-à-vis rehiring.

Another change in post-secondary education is the move away from in-person teaching to online instruction. While online teaching has been praised as offering more "advanced" and "open" learning and increased "**access**," these claims may be more myth than reality. Concerns about online education include issues of **alienation** (separation between people and the work they do),

commodification of education (tendency to treat it as something that can be bought or sold), and **access without mobility** (educational opportunities are provided, but not employment opportunities). Moreover, online courses have high dropout rates, insufficiently develop critical analysis skills due to reliance on instrumental education, and the eventual creation of a two-tiered system where those who can afford to attend an actual school will be perceived as having better credentials than those who can afford only an online program. This perception will simply reproduce the already existing class hierarchy.

The sociology of education explores other issues as well. One is the **underemployment**, which is defined as involuntary part-time and/or low-wage, low-skill employment for people with valuable skills, experience, and credentials. Another issue is the increase in **plagiarism**, defined as a serious form of academic misconduct in which another person's ideas are represented knowingly or unknowingly as one's own. Plagiarism is encouraged when role models indulge in plagiarism, and plagiarism becomes an enterprise (essay industry, graduate students who sell their writing skills, companies that sell services to catch plagiarism). The increasingly corporate nature of post-secondary education and the competition for students might dilute rules and makes it easier for those who plagiarize the get away with it.

Study Questions

1. Stephen Schecter argued that "education has never contributed as much to prosperity and social mobility as it has legitimized social inequality." What does he mean?

2. Compared to students in high-track classes, why do students in low-track classes have different concepts of their schools and themselves? Consider Jeannie Oakes's (2005) research in your answer.

3. How does the tracking system affect student performance?

4. Compare and contrast the four types of elementary schools Jean Anyon (1980) identifies in her research in terms of the education they offer. Which class category did your elementary schoolwork fall under?

5. What is the hidden curriculum? How has it shaped your educational experience?

6. What are the three educational models adopted in Canada? Briefly discuss each model's features, strengths, and weaknesses.

7. What are the three premises of multicultural education? In which ways has the multicultural educational model failed to realize its promise?

8. How has the increase in assigned homework impacted students and families? How does homework reproduce social class inequalities?

9. Briefly outline the main issues regarding Indigenous education today? Make explicit reference to textbook representation and credentialism. Have you noticed any changes to the issues raised in the chapter?

10. What are the main issues regarding adjunct faculty? How have these matters impacted your own education?

11. How might online education create two-tier system of university graduates?

12. Why has plagiarism increased in recent years?

Exploration and Discussion Exercises

1. How have corporations infiltrated educational institutions? In what ways, if any, have you been affected by this association?

2. How have changes in post-secondary education affected you? Discuss such issues as the use of more contract faculty, the move from in-person teaching to online instruction, and the increase of plagiarism.

Further Readings

Beagan, B. (2001). Micro Inequities and Everyday Inequalities: "Race," Gender, Sexuality and Class in Medical School. *The Canadian Journal of Sociology 26*(4): 583–610.
This article explores the experience of marginalized students in medical school.

Iwama, M. (2000). "At Dawn, Our Bellies Full": Teaching Tales of Food and Resistance from Residential Schools and Internment Camps in Canada. *Journal of Intercultural Studies 21*(3): 239–254.
This article explores the meaning of food from the perspective of residential school survivors.

Lindberg, T. (1997) What Do You Call an Indian Woman with a Law Degree: Nine Aboriginal Women at the University of Saskatchewan College of Law Speak Out. *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law 9*: 301.
This article explores the experience of Indigenous women in law school.

***MacLean's*: Grade Inflation: http://www.macleans.ca/tag/grade-inflation/**
This site offers some resources pertaining to the causes and effects of grade inflation.

Unesco: Education for All report
http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002322/232205e.pdf
This report takes a look at the state of education around the globe

Universities Canada: Tuition Fees
http://www.univcan.ca/universities/facts-and-stats/tuition-fees-by-university/
This websites provides detailed information pertaining to tuition fees across Canada, sorted by university.

Statistics Canada: Overqualification Among Recent University Graduates in Canada
http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/75-006-x/2014001/article/11916-eng.pdf
This report provides some statistics information on which graduates are most likely to be unemployed or underemployed after graduating from university.

Speak It! From the Heart of Black Nova Scotia
   https://www.nfb.ca/playlists/nfb_celebrates_black_history_month/viewing/speak_
   it_from_heart_of_black_nova_scotia/
   This documentary explores the experience of a group of black students attending a predomi-
   nantly white high school.

TED Talk: *Bring on the learning revolution!*
   http://www.ted.com/talks/sir_ken_robinson_bring_on_the_revolution
   This TED Talk makes a case for a shift away from standardized education to personalized
   learning.

Faking the Grade: http://www.cbc.ca/doczone/episodes/faking-the-grade
   In our society, it has become more socially acceptable to cheat than to fail. This documentary
   explores why and how students cheat.

Generation Jobless: http://www.cbc.ca/doczone/episodes/generation-jobless
   This documentary explores why an increasing number of university graduates remain unem-
   ployed and underemployed.