Overview

This class focuses on the relationship between education and broader societal processes and structures. Most people in the field of education give little thought to the ways in which schooling interacts with economic, social, cultural, and political factors in American society. The course has three basic objectives. First, it aims to introduce you to both the classical and contemporary academic and policy writings on the interaction of education with other forces in its environment. Second, the course is designed to help you uncover your own and others’ assumptions and beliefs about education and society. Thus, it aims to broaden your skills in addressing important questions such as: Why people go to school? Why do some succeed more? What factors outside of education play a role in this? How? Why are certain schools more effective than others? And, what forces determine the structure, curricular features, and the pedagogical techniques used in different schools? Answers to such questions often remain implicit, although they pervade the actions and choices of educational professionals, researchers, and the public at large. The third objective is to develop a deeper understanding of contemporary policy initiatives. Every policy is predicated on particular assumptions regarding the education-society relationship. Regardless of whether you are on the receiving or the originating end of the policy chain, it is important that you develop and articulate your views on any given policy with an eye on the implications of broader societal factors that influence policy-formation and implementation.

The content of the class is divided into three parts. We begin by reviewing the goals and functions of education in American society from a sociological perspective. Then, we address the relationship of education to three particular domains, namely the economy, community, and the family. We also address recent approaches to non-school problems that affect education. In part three, we get into policy and address four reform movements in particular. These are school desegregation, achievement and accountability, school choice, and No Child Left Behind.
Course Requirements

Course requirements include completion of the assigned readings (we’ll read quite a bit), active participation in the class discussions, 10 short personal reflection essays, 1 group presentation, and a term paper on a topic of your own choosing. See below for details on the assignments.

It is expected that students are lively participants in class discussions. You should be prepared to share your personal responses to the readings and criticize or agree with them based on your own views and beliefs. The golden rule is to explain your reasoning. There are no right or wrong answers in that regard. Participation in class discussions counts for a considerable portion of your final grade.

Assignments

Personal reflection essays
These are limited to 1 page, double-spaced, 12 Times Roman font, and all margins at 1 inch please. You are expected respond either to one of the assigned readings or find material from the popular, professional, or policy press that relates to at least one idea from the assigned readings for each relevant session. The material can be directly related to the topic (e.g., “the role of education in the labor market or in accumulating personal wealth” when we are scheduled to discuss the relationship of education with the economy), or indirectly related. For instance, you can find a news story or professional report that address technological change in recent years and then interpret that story or report from the perspective of at least 1 idea in the readings on the education-economy relationship. On due dates, submit a hard copy of both your write-up and the original material on which it is based, if the material is not among the assigned readings.

Group assignment
Once during the semester, you are expected to work with 3-4 others in the class to prepare a 40-45 minute session on the class topic. The session must involve mainly a discussion of some material you find from scholarly, popular, professional, or policy press—material that may involve competing views on the particular class topic or provide insight on the most recent developments, findings on debates on the topic. Please do your best to structure the time in ways to foster a lively debate as well. A key goal of this exercise is to stimulate thought provoking questions and insights in class. The ultimate structure of the 1-hour segment is up to you. You may choose to have a presentation format, do role-plays, design structured debates, or combine several activities, even do an origami show if you think it would work.

Term paper
You are expected to develop your knowledge and interest further in a particular topic of your own choosing. This could be anything—directly out of the class material or something that is
not included in class. It could be an abstract theoretical issue (e.g., race/ethnicity and schooling), a policy initiative (e.g., NCLB), or a practical question (e.g., teacher effectiveness). However, you must work from a macro perspective, writing with an eye on the education-society relationship; and you need to tie the topic unequivocally to class material in general. The paper must provide a clear description of the topic, a brief review of relevant writings, and, most importantly, your own view or argument regarding the matter. Be sure to convey your reasoning as rigorously as possible. Use Times New Roman 12 font and set margins at 1 inch. Double-spaced. 20-25 pages.

Due dates for the term paper:
September 12—Short (300 word) write-up on initial thoughts for topic.
October 3—Progress report (no longer than 2 pages)
October 24—Paper proposal outlining the description of the topic, a review of writings on it, and your “working” argument (5-page minimum length).
November 7—Short presentation.
December 5, December 12—Final paper and presentation.

Grading

Personal reflection essays 30% (10x3%)
Group assignment 15%
Term paper 35%
Class participation 20%

Texts

Required:

Supplemental:

* Copies of all other readings for the class, both required and supplemental, will be provided in class. Some are downloadable from databases available through KU.
Schedule

August 22: NO CLASS, Argun away at a conference in Vegas!

Required readings:

August 29: Basic functions and goals of American public education

We will review class objectives, assignments, and term paper.

This session addresses the goals of American public education as they are manifested in popular discourse as well as in the domains of policymaking and academic research.

Required readings:

Supplemental readings:

Assignments:
Individual assignment—Short reflection piece relating material from the popular, professional, or policy press to at least 1 idea from the readings. Do not exceed 1 page, bring a hard copy of the original material that you reflect on along with your own write-up. Be prepared to talk about it in class.

September 12: Functionalist approach to education

This session covers the functionalist or the “consensus” approach to education. Functionalism is a sociological paradigm that considers society a system of harmoniously interdependent parts. In this regard, education contributes to the maintenance of a system where individuals and groups
agree on the essential features of the social order. To what extent does this view hold true?
How can we understand education from a functionalist perspective? What are the advantages of
this perspective?

Required readings:
Hochschild, Jennifer L. 1995. "What is the American Dream?" Pp. 15-38 in Facing up to the
University Press.

Supplemental readings:
Tyack, David. 1966. "Forming the National Character: Paradox in Educational Thought of the
Parsons, Talcott. 1959. "The School Class as a Social System: Some of Its Functions in

Assignments:
Individual assignment (1)—Short reflection piece. The material you find or your reflection on it
can either agree or disagree with the “functionalist” view. The key is for you to make a point,
develop your own argument. Do not exceed 1 page.

Individual assignment (2)—Think about possible topics that you would be interested in for
writing your term paper on. These could be anything including an enduring issue in education,
such as school funding or school effectiveness, or a particular policy question, such as small
class size or NCLB. The key is to justify your interest by relating the topic to societal dynamics
that influence or is influenced by education. Write a short report, no longer than 300 words.
Please write efficiently.

September 19: Conflict approach to education

This time we will focus on the conflict approach to education, which considers society a context
of continuous struggle and competition among various groups for resources, power, and
privilege. Education typically contributes to the sectional interests of some groups and hurts
other groups. To what extent does this view hold true? What are its strengths and weaknesses?

Required readings:


**Supplemental readings:**


**Assignments:**

Individual assignment—Short reflection piece. The material you find or your reflection on it can either agree or disagree with the “conflict” view. As before, the key is for you to make a substantiated point.

**September 26: Education and the economy**

Education and economics are closely intertwined. We will focus on two areas in particular. The first is the relationship between education on the one hand and income and wealth on the other, both for individuals and nations. The second area deals with the relationship of schooling with the labor market.

**Required readings:**


**Supplemental readings:**


**Assignments:**

Individual assignment—Short reflection piece; members of Group 1 are exempt.

Group Assignment—**Group 1** designs a small session regarding the positive (functional) and negative (conflict-driven) relations between education and economics.

**October 3: Education and community**

This session addresses school-community relations. In the “localized” structure of American public education, the quality of education that children receive is often influenced by the nature of social resources and institutions available in the surrounding community. What are those influences? How do they transpire in various locations? And, what are their consequences?

**Required readings:**


**Supplemental readings:**


Assignments:

Individual assignment (1)—Short reflection piece; members of Group 2 are exempt.

Individual assignment (2)—Time to commit to a particular topic. Write a short “progress report,” no longer than 2 pages, which outlines your interest, the reason why you want to focus on this particular topic, and the relevance of the topic for the objectives and material in this class.

Group Assignment—**Group 2** designs a small session regarding positive (functional) and negative (conflict-driven) relations between education and community social dynamics.

**October 10: Fall break, no class**

**October 17: Education and the family**

Family is by far the most critical social institution that affects education. It is possible to take on a more functionalist or conflict-oriented view of the family’s role. How do parents influence education? What are the key individual and societal consequences?

**Required readings:**


**Supplemental readings:**


**Assignments:**

Group Assignment—**Group 3** designs a small session regarding positive (functional) and negative (conflict-driven) relations between education and the family.

**October 24: School and nonschool problems**

Both policymakers and practitioners often downplay the extent and nature of social problems outside the schools. They instead focus on the role of school to counteract these problems and level the playing field in American society. There is, however, a growing effort to understand and tackle non-school problems more directly. What are these problems? How can we recognize them when we see them? And, what can be done about them?

**Required readings:**


**Supplemental readings:**


**Assignments:**

Individual assignment (1)—Short reflection piece; members of Group D are exempt.
Individual assignment (2)—Draft of proposal for term paper; 5-page minimum. Discuss the topic, the particular angle you are taking, some of the material you have read so far, and any specific policy implication of your interest.

Group Assignment—**Group 4** designs a small session regarding the convergence and divergence of school-related and non-school related policies.

**October 31: Theories of inequality in American society, and their implications for schools**

Many policies to improve education involve implicit and explicit assumptions about the nature of social inequality in America. In this session, we will review the basic popular and academic views of inequality and discuss how these views underpin our own beliefs and attitudes as well as various education policies.

*Required readings:*


*Supplemental readings:*


*Assignments:*

Individual assignment—Short reflection piece; members of Group 5 are exempt. Please interpret the material you find with a particular eye on the assumptions (both implicit and explicit) that are made in it regarding the causes and consequences of inequality.

Group Assignment—**Group 5** designs a small session on what inequality (and equality) means in America and how such conceptions are related to public schooling.
November 7: Paper proposals and individual presentations due

Paper proposals are due (5-page minimum length). Be prepared for a 6-8 minute presentation of your work so far. PowerPoint preferred.

November 14: Race and education: Racial achievement gap and school segregation

Racial and ethnic segregation is an enduring problem in American public education, a problem some consider intractable. We will review the history and the basic challenges of segregation and desegregation in the schools, along with various views on the causes, consequences, and the repertoire of solutions available. We will also discuss the most current developments.

Required readings:

Supplemental readings:

Assignments:
Individual assignment—Short reflection piece.
November 21: Markets and education—Decentralized governance and school choice

Efforts to establish a “free market” system in the governance and distribution of public schooling have intensified in the last 25 years. Debates about the educational, political, and social consequences of these efforts endure. We will review the origins of this movement and the paradoxes involved in its outcomes and implementation.

Required readings:

Supplemental readings:

Assignments:
Individual assignment—Short reflection piece.

November 28: No Child Left Behind

NCLB is one of the most ambitious reform policies in American public education. It not only has high goals, but it combines a number of contemporary perspectives and redefines the federal role in public schooling. We will discuss its origins, issues surrounding the first five years of its implementation, and its possible outcomes in the future.

Required readings:
Desimone, Laura M., Thomas M. Smith, and David Friswold. 2008. “Has NCLB Improved Teacher and Teaching Quality for Disadvantaged Students?” Pp. 89-199 in Standards-


Supplemental readings:


Assignments:

Individual assignment—Short reflection piece; members of Group 6 are exempt.

Group Assignment—Group 6 designs a small session regarding the pros and cons of NCLB.

December 5, December 12: Final papers and individual presentations

Term paper is due. Also, prepare a 10-minute presentation of your paper. Describe the issue you are addressing and defend your argument and your reasoning. Include 2-3 minutes of Q&A.