



The Sociology of Education

Education is an important priority in all cultures – even those with no formal school system. A century ago, a compulsory education system did not exist within Britain, and people “made do” – learning informally through other channels.

This type of “informal” education continues to be an important part of people’s lives. However, the “formal” system has rapidly become an important priority and the vast majority of people now pass through specialised institutions, taught by qualified teachers and lecturers – who are paid (not very well) to ensure that selected knowledge and skills are passed from one generation to the next.

Education is important. It takes up a significant proportion of people’s lives and to some degree affects the rest of their lives. And it’s very expensive – in 1992, government expenditure on education was £32.3 billion!!

As the exercises on the right have (hopefully) illustrated, education is a key **institution** in society, and one that forms an important part of sociology. Within this unit we will be examining the formal education system and considering the following:

KEY QUESTIONS

- How has the education system of England and Wales developed over the past century?
- What is the role of education in society?
- What is *actually* learnt in schools?
- How can we explain different levels of educational achievement across gender, social class and ethnicity?



GETTING YOU THINKING

1. **What do you think is meant by “informal” education?**
2. **What kinds of things is it important for people to learn in this “informal education”?**
3. **What percentage of the overall public expenditure do you think was on education?**
4. **Estimate how many hours you have spent in the education system.**

AS Level Sociology: Education: Introduction



What do you think is the purpose of education? Use the photos above to help guide your thinking (look carefully at each one!) – but try to think of others.

Individuals	Society as a whole

Now think about the kinds of things you have learnt so far in your education, who gains from you acquiring this knowledge, set of attitudes or skills?

Could you learn effectively without school? Would society suffer if schools did not exist? How?

Two Types of Curriculum

The term **curriculum** simply means everything that is learnt within school. Much of this learning is of particular subject knowledge that deemed to be important for young people to know – this **formal learning** is called the **official curriculum**.

Look at your earlier list; much of what you have identified as being learnt in school probably falls into this category – for example, mathematics and basic Numeracy would be an example of the official curriculum. However, there are probably items left over, which do not fit well into this category.

A lot of what we learn in school is not “subject knowledge”, but ways of behaving which are valued by society - for example, the value of hard work and punctuality. This **informal learning** which is not directly taught or part of the official timetable is called the **hidden curriculum** - a term first coined by **Brian Jackson** (“Life in Classrooms”, 1968)

Go back to your original list of “things learnt in school” and categorise each item as belonging to either the official or hidden curriculum.

For each of the following aspects of school routine, think about what values are being encouraged:

Sports Days	
School Uniform	
Assemblies	
Registration	
House Competitions	
School rules	
Prefects	
Detention	

Look back at the photographs on the previous page; can you identify any “informal learning”?

Homework

1. Go to www.sociologystuff.com and register your username
2. During your normal routine in college, keep an eye out for the “hidden curriculum”. Try to find three “real-life” examples.