

Cultural Attitudes Toward Education in the United States

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Abstract

A look at the cultural attitudes towards education and how it impacts how society views education here in the US. There appears to be a negative image of education reflected in our culture based on the portrayal of 'educated' people in sitcoms, in music, in biographies, etc. This negative attitude effects how our students approach their education. If society does not place a high value on education, then how can individual students be expected to place a high value on their own education? So, what can be done about it? It will take a major cultural shift away from the negative undertones and towards the portrayal of having a good education is something to be proud of, and that the teaching profession is to be highly respected. We all have a part to play in that cultural shift.

Keywords: Education, cultural attitudes, negative attitudes, societal views.

Cultural Attitudes Toward Education in the United States

One of my favorite shows on television was *The Big Bang Theory*, but I was always troubled with a nagging sense of guilt for enjoying a show that had a negative attitude towards education. For all its popularity, the show, for me, just reinforces the negative cultural attitude toward education that exists in American society. If you have not seen the show, it is centered on five characters: roommates Leonard Hofstadter and Sheldon Cooper, Penny, a waitress and aspiring actress who lives across the hall; and Leonard and Sheldon's equally geeky and socially awkward friends and co-workers, aerospace engineer

Howard Wolowitz and astrophysicist Raj Koothrappali. Penny went to community college, but dropped out for unspecified reasons. She now works as a waitress while waiting for her big break into an acting career. Leonard and Sheldon are brilliant physicists, the kind of "beautiful minds" that understand how the universe works. Sheldon is quite content spending his nights playing *Klingon Boggle* with his socially dysfunctional friends, fellow scientists Wolowitz and Koothrappali. Penny is also portrayed as the most 'likeable' character on the show. Sheldon has some major quirks and phobias and is lacking in social skills. Howard also has his quirks and has a strange relationship with his mother which involves yelling back and forth. He often comes across as being creepy. Raj is very socially awkward when it comes to talking to females. Howard too has his share of deficiencies when it comes to social interactions, but he is seen as the most 'normal' of the four friends. Penny is portrayed as being consistently smarter, saner, along with possessing more common sense than all of them put together, and is often called upon to rescue these guys from whatever predicament they have found themselves in.

There are, and have been, other shows on television that portray education and the educated in a negative way. I remember watching the first season of *The Apprentice*. There was a contestant by the name of David Gould. He was originally from Philadelphia, and worked in New York City as a venture capitalist in the healthcare sector. David held two advanced degrees, an M.D. from Jefferson Medical College and an MBA from New York University, yet he was the first person in the history of the show to be fired (Schmitt, 2014). The subtle message here is that it does not matter how much education you

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have, you may end up finishing last anyway, or that education is not important. I think that young people may pick up on that message. The subtle message here seems to be, “Why waste your time going to college and getting an education when that is not what business leaders are looking?”

Back in March of 2011, Rutgers University’s Programming Association paid \$32,000 in student fees to book one of the most popular TV stars of our time (Toronto Star, 2011). Snooki, who gained popularity as a cast member on the MTV reality show Jersey Shore, became one of the highest paid reality stars at the time. She appeared at two question-and-answer sessions at the university. When asked what her advice was for Rutgers students, she said: “Study hard, but party harder.” The same university booked Nobel-prize winning author Toni Morrison to deliver the commencement speech that same year. Her fee for her May 15th, 2011 commencement speech at the 52,000-seat Rutgers Stadium in Piscataway was \$30,000 which is \$2000 less than Snooki got. Again, the subtle message here is that a reality TV cast member who is famous for her on-camera antics is more ‘valuable’ than a Nobel-prize winning author. Is that the message that we want to convey to our students, to our young people, to our society?

In case you think that I am limiting my examples to television, there are plenty other examples in other forms of media that contribute to this negative attitude of our culture surrounding education. For example, in 1980 Billy Joel had a hit song with “It’s Still Rock & Roll to Me.” The lyrics of the song contain the words “Should I try to be a straight ‘A’ student?/If you are then you think too much.” Again, what subtle (or not so subtle) message does this implant in a young person’s mind?

Just in case you thought that the negative lyrics were confined to songs from the past, the lyrics from the group Blue Scholars was a popular song from their 2005 album The Long March also contributes to our culture of negativity towards education.

*It goes one for the student who refuses to submit
And two for the teachers who are underpaid as shit
It’s the next generation of miseducated youth
Who demonstrate the truth and manage to make it through
It goes three for the strikes giving young bloods life
And four for the years you spent stifled inside
It’s the next generation of miseducated youth-next time ask
em for proof.*

This is the chorus to the song, and it is difficult to

find anything positive in these lyrics. Once these lyrics become part of the mainstream culture among young people, it contributes to the overall feeling that education is something bad and should be avoided.

Bruno Mars had a hit song in 2012 called The Lazy Song. It was a very popular song. Some of the lyrics contain the words “Yeah, I might mess around and get my college degree. / I bet my old man will be so proud of me. / But sorry pops, you’ll just have to wait.” Again, this is an example of the negative attitude towards education that is present in our popular culture. The idea that a person “might mess around” and get a college degree would lead the listener to believe that an education was easy to obtain and, by extension, nothing of value.

What do the following celebrities have in common; Lindsay Lohan, Britney Spears, Hilary Swank, Drew Barrymore, Christina Applegate, John Travolta, Nicholas Cage, Christina Aguilera, Jim Carrey, Quentin Tarantino, Paris Hilton, Avril Lavigne, Jessica Simpson, Charlie Sheen, Chris Rock, and Tom Cruise? They all dropped out of high school (Roberts, 2019). Many young people are able to name some of the names on the list as a way of justifying their argument that you do not have to have a high school diploma in order to be successful. Many young people admire and look up to these celebrities. The information about which celebrities dropped out of high school is usually included in their biographies whether in print form or on television. It is that subtle message that education is not important. That message permeates throughout our culture and these examples just serve to reinforce that message. I remember when the Charlotte Hornets came to Charlotte back in 1988 and George Shinn was the owner. It seemed to me that whenever the name George Shinn was mentioned in the media, the line “the young boy from Kannapolis who finished dead last of his high school graduating class” was a mandatory inclusion (Holder, 2023). Oftentimes while giving a speech, he would mention that he never read a book for the first eighteen years of his life. The subtle message here was that education is not important (or worse – it was an impediment) to being successful. With so many impressionable minds excited about the Hornets coming to town, the message was repeated over and over.

The late Steve Jobs, perhaps the best business leader of our era, dropped out of Reed College.

Bill Gates, Paul Allen, Michael Dell, Mark Zuckerberg, Jack Dorsey, and Larry Ellison are all college dropouts. The 'problem' is not that these people dropped out of high school or college, but rather the attention that this gets in the media. It is as if the message is that if you want to be famous, successful, wealthy, etc., then you should do what these people did and drop out of college or high school. By including (sometimes highlighting) this drop out information, it becomes embedded in the culture of the society and leads to a negative view of education. I have heard it many times from students that so-and-so dropped out of school and went on to be famous, rich, successful, etc. Again, the cultural attitude towards education is that it is something negative, and if education is portrayed in a negative manner throughout the media and this then becomes a cultural norm, then by extension the citizens of that society will tend to view education in a negative manner.

Allow me to elaborate here on the influence of the media on our attitudes toward education. In American society, it is deemed alright to flaunt your money or status but it is not alright to flaunt your intelligence. People may drive expensive cars, show off their beautiful houses, beautiful spouses, designer clothes or talk about having a lot of money, but nobody shows off their SAT scores or their ACT scores. It is just not done. When was the last time you saw a TV show where the main character was highly educated AND that this character was portrayed as being a role model, a hero, an inspiration, or as a positive influence?

Here is an expression that I never heard up until about twenty years ago. "He who can, does. He who cannot, teaches," which is attributed to the writer George Bernard Shaw. Being an educator, I was somewhat offended by this comment when I first heard it. I have had it repeated to me over the years by those who think it is funny or clever, or have no idea that they are contributing to the negative cultural attitude towards education. It is as if it is culturally acceptable to make fun of or belittle those in education. What if the expression was changed to "He who can, does. He who cannot, becomes an accountant?" Would the accountants feel outraged? Would this cast all accountants in a very negative light? Another little add-on to this saying that I have heard recently is the following: "He who can, does. He who cannot, teaches. He who cannot teach, teaches gym." My apologies to all the gym teachers,

but I am using this example to make the point that if this statement is out there in society, then it is a part of the negative cultural attitude towards education. Society shapes our education. Society is greatly influenced by the media. If the media portrays education in a negative manner, then society will have this negative view of education and the educated. In this global economy where education appears to be the key to a successful economy, we need to have a positive attitude toward education if we are to move forward.

I know of high schools that have countdown clocks to the start of football season, yet they do not have countdown clocks to the start of the school year. What subliminal message are they sending out to people? I am sure that you have picked up your local newspaper and read a story of a young high school athlete who is going off to play football, or basketball, or some other sport for some university. There is usually a photo of the young athlete surrounded by his/her coach, his/her parents and siblings, and his/her college coach. Again, what is the message here? When was the last time you saw a similar photo of a young man or woman signing a letter of intent to study engineering at MIT? Every year I see a photo of the winning Super Bowl champions along with the President standing in a garden at the White House. I am happy for those teams who worked so hard and it is a great that the White House recognizes their accomplishments. Where is the same media coverage when the White House hosts the annual science fair? If you did not know that the White House is now in its twenty-fourth year of hosting this event, then chalk it up to what society has deemed more newsworthy.

Perhaps it would be more insightful if I were to include some examples of the cultural attitudes toward from other countries. The Japanese hold large celebrations and expensive presents are given when a child enters kindergarten. According to a U.S. Department of Education report: "Much of a mother's sense of personal accomplishment is tied to the educational achievements of her children, and she expends great effort helping them. In addition, there is considerable peer pressure on the Japanese mother. The community's perception of a woman's success as a mother depends in large part on how well her children do in school" (U.S. Department of Education Study, n.d.). This is their cultural attitude toward education. Finland and South Korea are at the top of international comparisons of test scores, they

differ greatly in methods of teaching and learning. They hold the top spots because of a shared cultural belief in the importance of education and its "underlying moral purpose." Their cultural attitudes toward education are such that education is highly prized and sought after. In Finland, it is a tremendous honor to be a teacher, and teachers are afforded a high status of respect and admiration. In Singapore, becoming a teacher is competitive and highly selective, where again, it is a great honor to be a teacher. In Iceland, a country of around 300,000 people, being an author earns you the respect of the community. Iceland has one of the highest literacy rates in the world because being able to read and write is expected and highly valued (Guinness World Records, 2013).

I have spent a great deal of time commenting on what I perceive to be the negative attitude toward education that exists in the general culture of the United States. I would briefly like to touch on how the culture of the individual family can also greatly influence the attitudes toward education. A clear relationship exists between the culture of the home and that of the school. Children from middle- and upper-class families will share a common mode of speech, style of social interaction and social background with their teachers. The content of what they are taught and the manner in which they are taught are likely to appear familiar to them. In contrast, for children from other class backgrounds, and especially for those of low-income families, the school will represent a cultural and social world set apart from that of their families and communities, and one in which they are likely to feel out of place. A child from a home where a positive attitude towards education exists will benefit from a positive interaction between the influences of home and school. A child from a home where education is viewed as something negative, or at best, something to be tolerated, will fail to reach the higher levels of the educational system, either because they are excluded by poor performance or because they, in effect, exclude themselves. The culture of the home will translate it to how well or how poorly the child will do in school. If the culture of the home is such that the child is expected to go to college, then in all likelihood that child will go to college. If the culture of the home is that education is viewed in a negative way, then the child from that environment will struggle to go beyond the legal age-requirement to stay in school.

So, what can we do? The cultural attitudes and values surrounding an educational system do more to support or undermine it than the system can do on its own. Using the positive elements of this culture and, where necessary, seeking to change the negative ones, are important to promoting successful outcomes in the US. We also need to foster a culture of respect for teachers. Good teachers are essential to high-quality education. Finding and retaining them is not necessarily a question of high pay. Instead, teachers need to be treated as the valuable professionals they are, not as technicians in a huge, educational machine. We simply need to foster a positive cultural attitude toward education in every aspect of our society. If education is held up as something positive, something to strive for, something that is highly valued and prized in our society, then I am confident that we will see this reflected in better outcomes for our students, our communities, and our nation.

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Authors' Note

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