



STUDIES IN SOCIAL INEQUALITY

# Determined to Succeed?

*Performance versus Choice in Educational Attainment*

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EDITED BY  
MICHELLE JACKSON

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Educational Attainment*

*Edited by Michelle Jackson*



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## PREFACE

In many countries, concern about social-background inequalities in educational attainment has focused on inequalities in test scores and grades, with interventions including early-childhood education and low-cost child care being proposed as necessary to reduce such inequalities. The presumption behind these increasingly widespread interventions is that the best way to reduce inequalities in educational *outcomes* is to reduce inequalities in *performance*. But is this presumption correct? Is it possible that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely not just to perform well but also to proceed to higher levels of education even when they do perform well? Is part of the problem, in other words, the choices that these children are making? If it is, might it be more appropriate to focus on interventions that address such choices rather than those that focus solely on performance? The purpose of this book is to take on just such questions and to offer the first comprehensive cross-national examination of the roles of performance and choice in generating social-background inequalities in educational attainment.

This volume combines detailed analysis of educational transitions in different countries with general commentary on the roles of performance and choice in creating educational inequality. At the heart of the volume is a methodological approach that allows us to quantitatively assess the contributions of performance and choice. This approach is explained and developed early on in the volume and then applied throughout the balance of the book. The analyses based on this method are not of purely academic interest. By considering educational inequalities as the overall consequence of two separate processes (performance and choice), we do of course gain

greater theoretical and empirical precision. But the policy implications are also clear and dramatic. The results presented here and in a web appendix (<http://www.primaryandsecondaryeffects.com>) allow us to begin developing an empirical foundation for choosing between interventions oriented toward performance and those oriented toward choice.

As do several other volumes in this field (e.g., Shavit and Blossfeld 1993; Shavit, Arum, and Gamoran 2007), this volume represents a collaborative approach to cross-national comparative research, with authors from European societies and the United States cooperating to produce comparable analyses across a range of institutional contexts. This cross-national cooperation came about through support from the European Union's Framework 6 Network of Excellence, EQUALSOC (Economic Change, Quality of Life, and Social Cohesion), a collaboration among research centers across Europe. The network is distinctive for its unwavering support of junior scholars and its willingness to fund projects over the long period necessary for cross-national collaborations to come to fruition. EQUALSOC provided funding for project meetings, research assistance, and conferences and meetings across Europe. This volume (alongside numerous other research papers) is the outcome of the collaborations fostered by the network. It is seemingly fashionable in the current political climate for British citizens to hold negative views of the EU, but it is hard to imagine a more effective and productive European-wide social science collaboration than that funded under EQUALSOC.

I suspect that few would recommend book editing as a way to make friends, given the cajoling and the issuing of (occasionally unreasonable) demands that accompany the role. But I am fortunate indeed that the authors in this volume were so committed to the project that they submitted to such cajoling with enthusiasm and good humor. In addition to the detailed comments and suggestions issued at project meetings, each draft chapter was subjected to careful, sustained, and insightful review by the other contributors. This is collegiality at its best. I am very grateful to have been part of such an exceptional group, and I thank all of the authors for their contributions to the project.

The wider scholarly community also contributed to this volume. Papers from the project were presented at many workshops and conferences, and particularly those of the EDUC (Education, Social Mobility and Social



Cohesion) group within the EQUALSOC network. Within EQUALSOC, I should like to particularly acknowledge Robert Erikson, John Goldthorpe, Jan O. Jonsson, Walter Müller, and Yossi Shavit, who offered perceptive comments, constructive suggestions, and calm counsel. Valuable contributions to the project also came from the twice-yearly meetings of the Research Committee on Social Stratification (RC28) of the International Sociological Association. The committee offers a welcoming and stimulating intellectual environment for those concerned with issues of social stratification and inequality, and many of the chapters in this volume have benefited greatly from the contributions of RC28 participants. The editors and reviewers of the *Studies in Social Inequality* series of Stanford University Press offered extremely helpful and constructive advice on revisions to the volume, and I particularly thank Kate Wahl for her thoughtful contributions to the project.

While preparing this volume, I was fortunate to be a part of academic communities on both sides of the ocean. I started the volume at Nuffield College and at the Centre for Research Methods in the Social Sciences at Oxford University, and I finished it at the Center on Poverty and Inequality and the Institute for Research in the Social Sciences at Stanford University. I am extremely grateful to the Center on Poverty and Inequality for its support of the project in recent years. I thank colleagues and friends associated with these institutions, many of whom offered constructive criticism and helpful suggestions on the project. While a great many individual scholars offered valuable comments and suggestions, I would particularly like to thank Richard Breen, David Cox, Geoffrey Evans, and Colin Mills. Their unwavering enthusiasm for the project and reassuring words are much appreciated.

Those who work on social stratification and the intergenerational transmission of inequality will perhaps be unsurprised to learn that the editor of a volume on educational inequality was borne of a family of schoolteachers. I thank my parents for their support and for illuminating discussions about educational inequalities as experienced by those attempting to tackle them head-on. I also appreciate the support of my two dear sisters, Catherine Rose and Alexandra Wall; my grandmother, Eva Jackson; and other family and friends. And finally, I wish to thank David Grusky. He is very special.

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## Introduction

### How Is Inequality of Educational Opportunity Generated? The Case for Primary and Secondary Effects

*Michelle Jackson*

When sociologists write about inequalities in educational attainment, they frequently get under way by emphasizing the extraordinary transformations of educational institutions over the course of the 20th century. And indeed, it is hard to imagine how to open a volume on inequalities in educational attainment without acknowledging the significant educational expansion and reform in all Western societies over the last century. The basic features of expansion and reform are well known and may be summarized as comprising three fundamental steps: the establishment of near-universal primary education at the beginning of the 20th century, the rise of near-universal secondary education toward the middle of the century, and the (as yet unfinished) development of a system of mass higher education toward the end of the century. An important consequence of this expansion has been an increase in the average level of educational attainment, such that most of the students who enter secondary education today can expect to obtain a tertiary-level qualification by the end of their educational career. Alongside increasing average levels of attainment, we also observe increasing differentiation in educational systems, so that students may choose from a range of academic and vocational courses in many diverse specialist fields.

The development of educational systems can be understood principally as a response to the demands of changing economic and occupational structures but also as an attempt to create a greater equality of educational opportunity. Yet a great deal of research has demonstrated that significant inequalities in educational attainment between members of different social groups remain. One important area of research focuses on social-class inequalities in educational attainment; children of professional or managerial



background generally achieve higher levels of educational performance and make more ambitious educational choices than do children from working-class backgrounds (e.g., Shavit and Blossfeld 1993; Breen et al. 2009).

Arguably of more interest than the current state of class inequalities in educational attainment is the question of how far these inequalities have changed over time. *Persistent Inequality* (Shavit and Blossfeld 1993) argues that there has been a relatively high degree of temporal stability in the association between class origin and educational attainment. More recent work suggests that a trend toward a weakening association between class origin and educational attainment is present in many European countries, particularly if changes over a relatively long period are considered (Jonsson, Mills, and Müller 1996; Vallet 2004; Breen and Jonsson 2005; Breen et al. 2009, 2010). But this observation should not lead us to lose sight of the following: even if weaker now than in the past, class inequalities in educational attainment remain as a feature of modern societies and this feature is likely to linger for some time. The durability of these inequalities is particularly striking when compared to the far more substantial changes in gender, ethnic, and racial inequalities observed in many countries.

In this volume we aim to understand why social-background inequalities in educational attainment, or inequality in educational opportunity (IEO),<sup>1</sup> should exist and persist in eight Western countries. Should IEO be understood as a consequence of differences in academic ability and performance between members of different social classes? Or should it be understood as a consequence of differences in the educational decisions made by members of different social classes, such that students from advantaged backgrounds choose higher levels of education more frequently than students from disadvantaged backgrounds, regardless of their academic performance? These basic questions outline extreme positions on how IEO is created. In this volume we consider social-background inequalities in educational attainment to be a consequence of *both* social-background differences in academic performance and social-background differences in the choices that students make, holding performance constant. Our main aim is to determine the relative importance of these two features in creating IEO. Insofar as changes in IEO are observed, we ask whether they can be attributed to changes in the relationship between class and performance or to changes in the class-biased choices that are made, conditional on perfor-

mance. If we observe declines in one or both effects, leading to a decline in IEO, this provides us with important evidence about which policies and institutional innovations hold most promise for further reducing class effects.

*IEO* is a term that carries some ambiguity in that it can refer either to a summary measure of *all* inequalities related to social background generated by an educational system or to only the social-background inequalities generated *at a given transition*. For example, Boudon defines IEO as meaning “differences in level of educational attainment according to social background” (1974, xi) but also states that “IEO rates are subject to variations as a function of national context, point in time, and school level. . . . [A] certain amount of IEO is present . . . at each school level” (1974, 41). In this volume we are concerned with IEO at given educational transitions, and we therefore take the latter understanding of IEO to be our own. In each chapter IEO is discussed in relation to the transition under consideration and to the risk set of students eligible for that transition. On the whole, we do not address the question of how far IEO assessed for different transitions and risk sets accumulates to a summary measure of all IEO generated by an educational system.<sup>2</sup>

#### DEFINING PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EFFECTS

Our understanding of IEO has at its heart an individual-level model, in which a student achieves a certain level of academic performance and then makes a decision about how to proceed in the educational system. The decision that students make when faced with an educational transition is shaped by their previous academic performance, which provides information about the likelihood of successful completion of higher levels of education. But the decision is also influenced by factors other than previous academic performance, because a student takes into account the costs and benefits of the different choices that might be made in relation to the transition.

The decomposition of IEO into a part determined by differences in previous performance across social groups and a part determined by the choices made by members of those groups is well established in the literature, in which performance effects are labeled primary effects and choice effects are labeled secondary effects<sup>3</sup> (Girard and Bastide 1963; Boudon 1974). As Breen and Goldthorpe write,

Primary effects are all those that are expressed in the association that exists between children's class origins and their average levels of demonstrated academic ability. Children of more advantaged backgrounds . . . perform better, on average, than children of less advantaged backgrounds in standard tests, examinations, and so on. . . . [S]econdary effects . . . are effects that are expressed in the actual choices that children, together perhaps with their parents, make in the course of their careers within the educational system—including the choice of exit. (1997, 277)

The history of the conceptual distinction between primary and secondary effects is discussed in more detail below.

Before proceeding any further, an apology on the matter of terminology is in order. While the concepts of primary and secondary effects can be defined with precision, the labels attached to the concepts are unfortunately rather ambiguous. Although one can understand the rationale behind the labels once the concepts have been defined, in that social background *primarily* affects performance and then *secondarily* affects choices (conditional on performance), there are few clues to the meanings of these labels for the uninitiated. It is also curious that these terms should be used in a field concerned with education systems, in which “primary” and “secondary” are understood first and foremost to refer to different phases of the school career or school system, not to the decomposition of IEO presented here. Despite the problems with the terminology of primary and secondary effects, the terms are now fully established in the literature on IEO, and in this volume we continue to use these labels. We also refer to primary and secondary effects as “performance” and “choice” effects, so as to further emphasize their meanings. To avoid confusion, we largely avoid using “primary” and “secondary” in isolation to refer to the school career.

#### THE UTILITY OF PRIMARY AND SECONDARY EFFECTS

There are clear advantages to treating IEO as the overall consequence of the operation of primary and secondary effects: the concepts allow sociologists to gain greater precision in identifying the determinants of IEO, and they also have obvious implications for social policy.

As discussed below, primary and secondary effects are likely to be generated by different processes, and as a consequence, the explanatory tools needed to explain the primary effects of differences in performance