



# **Two Conceptions of Education and Social Mobility**

Martin Carnoy

Stanford University and Higher School of Economics

September 16, 2016

---

- **One way of thinking about education and social mobility is that schooling is a vehicle that society organizes to equalize opportunity. It is intended to allow bright young people to reach higher positions in society.**
- **Another view is that schooling is organized to *reproduce inequality*—that schooling is designed to appear neutral but distinctly favors children from higher social class families.**

## **Alternative Views of the Issue**

---

- **In the first view, we would expect that there is considerable upward and downward intergenerational success in school—much “resilience” among lower social class youth.**
- **In the second view, we would expect that a student’s academic success in school is highly related to the student’s family’s social class, and that social class also plays an important role in economic success independent of school achievement.**

# **Expected Results**

---

- **The Enlightenment ideal, posed as a contrast to a strict class society, promoted the concept that individuals with relevant skills would rise to the top in a society where all are created equal and the free market puts a premium on skills.**
- **Public education eventually became the expression of this concept, as well as the concept that public education would teach youth democratic values (Horace Mann, John Dewey).**


**What is the reasoning behind the view that education is a source of mobility?**

---

- **For international audiences, the concept of educational quality as a means to promote greater mobility and social equality is strongly supported by all the major agencies—World Bank, UNESCO, and the OECD.**
- **PISA, for example, has consistently downplayed the role of social class in defining educational success and has pushed concepts such as “resiliency” in focusing on low SES youth who score high on the PISA.**

**More recent expressions of the ideal of education as a source of mobility**

---

- 
- **The second part of the argument for education as a source of mobility is that higher academic achievement contributes to higher wages independent of an individual's social class background, and that this relationship is growing stronger over time (Murnane, Willet, and Levy, 1995).**
  - **UNESCO has also picked up on this theme (2005).**
  - **If achievement can increase wages, it means that schooling can improve economic success regardless of an individual's family's social position**

**More recent expressions of the ideal of education as a source of mobility**

---

- **In the 1970s, Bowles & Gintis (1975) made an empirical argument that students' test scores showed very little relationship to higher wages controlling for students' level of education, and that level of education was highly related to student's SES.**
- **Bourdieu & Passeron (1979) argued that the education system was actually organized to “reproduce” the new class structure characteristic of capitalist societies.**

**What is the reasoning behind the view that education does not produce significant social mobility?**

---

- **B&P argued that the mechanism of reproduction was the educational system's emphasis on skills that higher SES families taught their children at home, especially language skills.**
- **Others showed that as lower SES students got access to lower levels of schooling, the economic and social value of completing those levels fell, and that higher SES students systematically attained levels of schooling and types of schools that had higher value.**

**What is the reasoning behind the view that education does not produce significant social mobility?**

---



- **Those who see education as a source of social mobility emphasize that educational attainment is largely a function of educational performance, and that socio-economic success is largely a function of individual academic achievement and attainment.**
- **Those who see education as largely reproducing the structure of who gets what in society (capitalist and socialist), emphasize that the educational system largely reproduces academic performance based on students' SES and that student performance in educational attainment and economic and social success is much less important than family SES and the SES networks of these families (social capital)**

## **Summarizing the arguments**

---

- **In the view that education produces mobility, students and their families will make choices based on student performance in school—students from different SES families with the same performance will make the same educational choices/**
- **When completing their education, they will make the same economic choices based on their academic performance, not their SES.**
- **But in the reproduction view, such “choices” are considerably defined by students’ social class background—their parents’ occupations—and by their fellow students and circle of friends (peer influence), as well as the staff of the schools they attend, who have their own expectations of students from lower and higher social class background or from different ethnic groups.**

## **The role of “choice” in mobility and reproduction**

---

- **1. We know that the larger the social class divisions in a country (more unequal income distribution, for example), the more important is the student's SES in determining educational attainment.**
- **We know that students with similar academic performance (and their families) make very different educational and job choices related to their SES, for many reasons—different family aspirations and expectations, peer behavior, school expectations, etc, all social class related.**
- **2. We know that as educational systems expand, the economic value of lower levels of education decline relative to the value of higher levels.**
- **3. We know that the level of schooling attained is generally more important in determining earnings than is the test score of students with a given level of schooling.**
- **4. We know that student SES is usually more important than academic performance in determining economic rewards for those with the same level of schooling, largely because of the social capital associated with social class.**

**What do we know empirically  
about these relationships?**

---

- **The educational system intends to give young people the tools to become more “effective” members of their societies.**
- **But the system has a side effect of convincing youth and their families that whatever happens to them in the educational system is largely of their own making.**
- **It therefore shifts responsibility for success and failure in society to individual students, even though the educational system is largely organized to reward those who already come prepared to perform well.**
- **The system is also not organized to influence educational choices against the current of the social class structure.**
- **It therefore tends not to “compensate” for differences in performance that students bring to school from their family background.**
- **It also tends to support choices made on the basis of families’ social class, even though those choices may not be consistent with students’ academic performance.**

**Does formal education intentionally reproduce social class?**

---

- **There is evidence that the educational system can contribute to educational and social mobility.**
- **But there is also evidence that, as a mobility enabler, the educational system is structurally limited by its location within class societies that, even when democratic, are likely to organize and finance schooling so that mobility is likely to be lower than optimal.**
- **This means that the State has to take a proactive role in order to combat its own class, race, ethnic, and gender bias in the provision of education, the training of teachers, and the advisement of students on educational and occupational choices.**

**What does this mean for  
educational and social policy?**

---

- **Implementing a proactive State policy for equal opportunity is not simple, because when the State does this, higher social class parents have options for their children to attend alternative (higher cost) private educational options that can be organized to provide even better access to universities, good jobs, and higher incomes.**
- **The State, then, must be prepared to be in constant financial competition with its own higher and upper middle classes to provide high quality schooling opportunities for lower SES children, and, in addition, to provide information that changes lower SES family perceptions of job and income possibilities.**

**What does this mean for  
educational and social policy?**

---