

Persistent inequality: contemporary inequality in a historical context

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ABSTRACT

My goal in this commentary is to complement the findings in the article on Education Inequalities by Christine Farquharson, Sandra McNally and Imran Tahir with some general remarks which will provide a context and framework for understanding educational inequalities in Britain. I make five main points, summarized at the start of each section of the commentary.

Key words: education; inequality; social mobility

Persistent inequality: contemporary inequality in a historical context

The inequalities in UK education evident today have a long history. There have been substantial improvements in the educational attainment of the population as a whole but there has been little change in attainment gaps between those from different socio-economic backgrounds.

Figure 1, using data from the UK Labour Force Survey (LFS), shows the proportion of adults in 10-year age groups, from 30 to 69 years, who acquired an undergraduate university degree or higher qualification, distinguishing people according to the social class of the main wage earner in their household when they themselves were aged 14 years (measured using the Office for National Statistics Socio-economic Classification, NS-SEC, see the box for details).

Box 1

The full set of NS-SEC categories is shown in Table 1. In the figures shown later they are grouped into four: NS-SEC 1 (large employers; higher managerial occupations; higher professionals), NS-SEC 2 (lower managerial/professional occupations), NS-SEC 3–5 (intermediate and skilled manual occupations), and NS-SEC 6–8 (unskilled manual occupations).

The overwhelming majority of people complete their formal education before the age of 30 years, and so, by comparing age groups in the LFS, we are, effectively, comparing people born at different times during the second half of the 20th century.¹ The 10-year age groups used here do not map directly onto 10-year

birth cohorts because I have amalgamated multiple waves of the LFS. Those aged 60 to 69 years in the data were born between 1945 and 1959, members of the 50 to 59 years age group between 1955 and 1969, the 40 to 49 years age group between 1965 and 1979, and the 30 to 39 years age group between 1975 and 1989.

Figure 1 shows four salient features of educational inequality in the UK. First, there is an upward trend in the percentages attaining at least an undergraduate degree; 34% of men aged 30 to 39 years have a degree, compared with 18% of men aged 60 to 69 years. Second, there are clear gaps in attainment between people coming from different social backgrounds, with the largest gaps in attainment being between those from managerial and professional occupations (the top two NS-SEC classes) and the rest. Third is the very clear gender difference in the trends; the lines for women slope upwards more steeply reflecting their greater growth in educational attainment. Fifteen percent of women in the oldest age group have a degree compared with 41% of those aged 30 to 39 years. Parity between women and men was reached among cohorts born in the 1960s. Fourth, despite the overall upward trend, there is no sign of any reduction in social origin differences. For women and men alike the lines in Fig. 1 run, for the most part, parallel—indeed, among women there are suggestions of widening class gaps. The same overall pattern of approximately constant gaps between upward-sloping lines would be evident if we had looked instead at the percentages acquiring at least an A-level or equivalent qualification. This pattern of overall increases in educational attainment, together with persistent inequality according to social background, has been widely reported in research published over the last 40 years (Halsey et al. 1980; Breen 2005: 59) referring back to cohorts born at the start of the 20th century.

A reduction in social origin gaps has occurred at lower levels of education: Fig. 2 shows the percentages of each group acquiring any GCSE grades A* to C or equivalent. The narrowing of the gaps is evident but this is a ceiling effect: the top NS-SEC

¹ Though biases in inferring trends over birth cohorts can arise if mortality or emigration are related to educational attainment but in this case these biases are unlikely to be substantial.

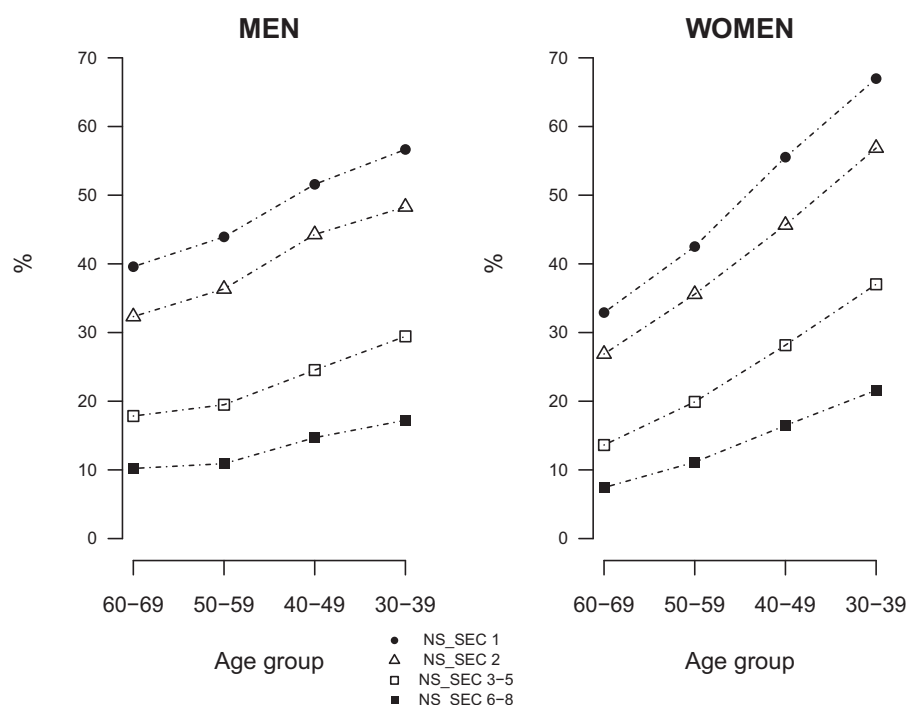


Figure 1: Percentage of people attaining university qualification by age group.
Source: Quarterly Labour Force Survey (LFS) 2014–2019.

Table 1: NS-SEC Class Schema.

1.1 Large employers/higher managerial occupations
1.2 Higher professional occupations
2. Lower managerial/professional occupations
3. Intermediate occupations
4. Small employers and own account workers
5. Lower supervisory and technical occupations
6. Semi-routine occupations
7. Routine occupations
8. No wage earner in household at age 14

groups reached saturation in the cohorts born after the war: in the 60 to 69 years age group over 90% of men and 89% of women from NS-SEC 1 reached this level of attainment. Similar trends are found in other European countries (Breen et al. 2009). But at a slightly higher level of education, the gap in the proportions attaining grade 4/C in English and Maths at GCSE among students eligible for free school meals and those not eligible has remained constant over the past decade (see fig. 28 of Farquharson et al. 2024).

If we shift our focus to the top of the distribution and examine attainment of a degree from one of the 24 Russell Group Universities there are suggestions of widening inequalities (Fig. 3). Among men, children of NS-SEC 1 origins (large employers, higher managers and professionals) are pulling away from the rest; particularly among women, there is a general widening of attainment gaps. This tendency is more pronounced in post-graduate education. About 35% of annual graduates from higher education in the UK are post-graduates, mostly from taught masters courses (HESA Student Statistics 2016/17, Fig. 6). Here ‘social class inequalities [are] emerging and steepening, with the youngest age groups seeing sharper and statistically significant differences across social class of origin’ (Wakeling and Laurison 2017: 570). The gender gap at the postgraduate level still favours men.

Although gaps in attainment between people from different socio-economic backgrounds are largely persistent, the proportions of people coming from the different NS-SECs has shifted, as Table 2 shows. The upgrading of the occupational structure has led a larger share of successive birth cohorts to come from professional and managerial backgrounds (NS-SECs 1 and 2). Despite this, however, almost two-thirds of 30–39 year-olds come from the two bottom NS-SEC groups.

There are substantial differences in educational attainment by ethnic group and there has been considerable improvement in the position of most (though not all) non-White ethnic groups, particularly women. Indian and Pakistani groups saw the greatest increase between 1991 and 2011 in the proportions with a degree; Pakistani and Bangladeshi groups saw the largest fall in the proportions with no qualification (Lymeropoulou and Parameshwaran 2014). Second-generation members of ethnic minority groups, on average, acquire higher educational qualifications than the White majority (Crawford and Greaves 2015) for access to University, for example). This is something of a paradox, given the generally less favourable social origins of immigrant children. The articles in this collection by Farquharson et al. (especially section 3) and by Mirza and Warwick (section 1.3) provide more comprehensive descriptions and discussion of ethnic differences in education.

The problem of high attainment

To understand why educational inequality by social background is persistent we need to look not only at why some children from poorer families perform poorly but also why children from more advantaged families consistently do better.

The occurrence of persistent inequality alongside increasing educational attainment presents a challenge to explanation. For one thing, it casts doubt on the applicability of explanations of social background differences in education that rely on fixed

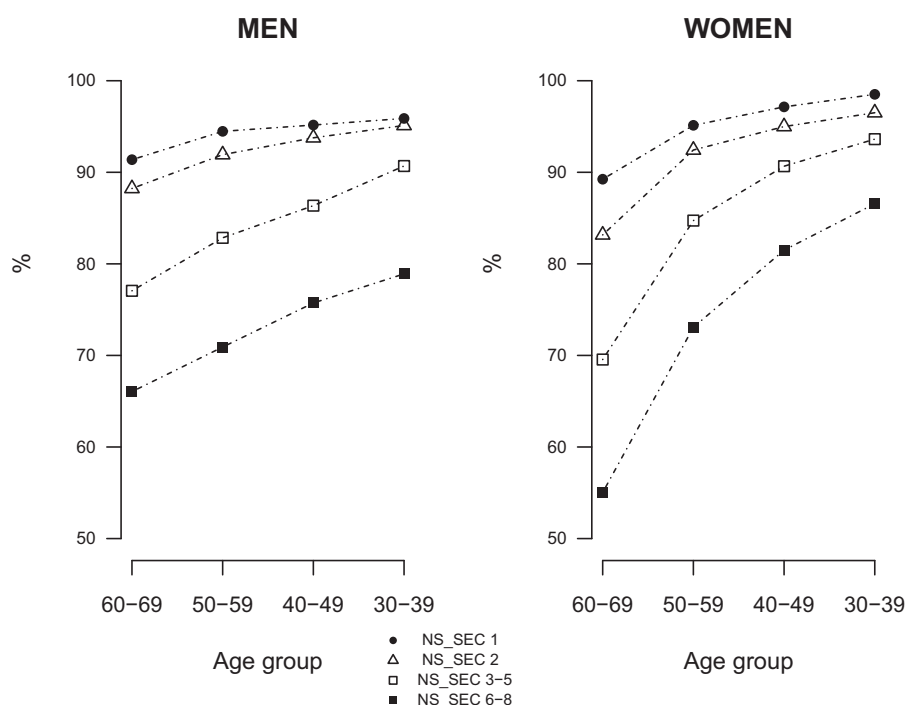


Figure 2: Percentage of people attaining at least GCSE grades A*-C or equivalent by age group.
Source: Quarterly Labour Force Survey (LFS) 2014-2019.

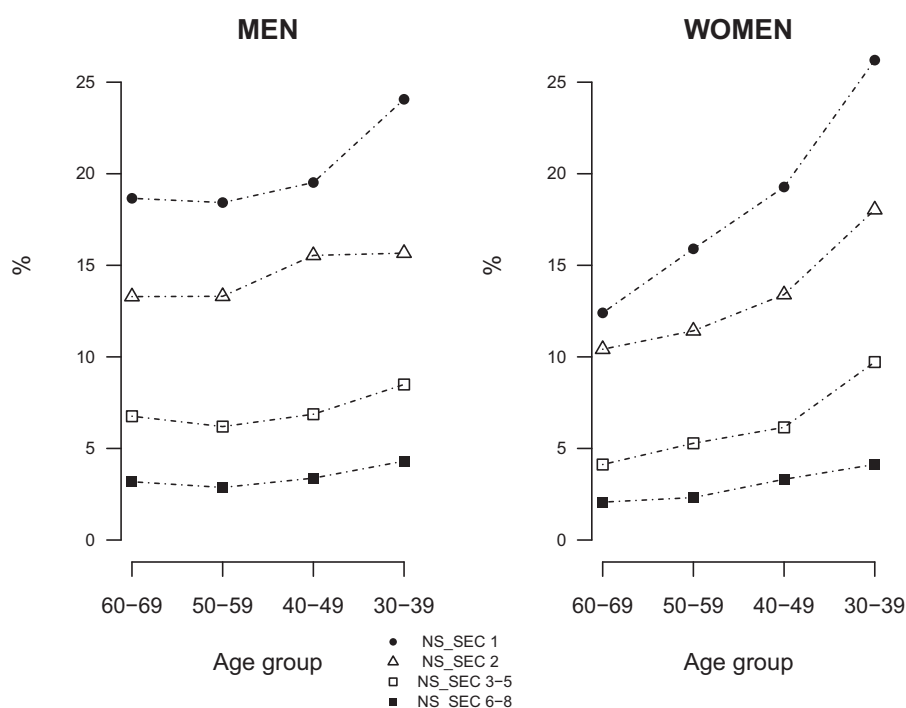


Figure 3: Percentage of people attaining a university degree from a Russell Group University.
Source: Quarterly Labour Force Survey (LFS) 2014-2019.

characteristics – working class culture or genetic differences – because educational attainment among the working class has increased and at much the same rate as for all other groups. For another, it shows that inequality is not only driven by what is happening at the bottom of the distribution among children from less advantaged families. Substantial numbers of children from poorer families have been increasing their educational attainment, as Figs 1-3 showed, but this has not led to a reduction in inequality of

educational outcomes (or, at any rate, not beyond the lowest and nowadays least valuable educational levels). To understand why inequality persists we need to examine what is happening at the top and the middle of the distribution, and not just at the bottom.

It is widely recognized that better off and better educated parents seek to advantage their children in ways that are consequential for their children's education, both directly (private tutoring, for example) and indirectly (for example, through

Table 2: NS-SEC distribution within age groups (in %).

	60–69	50–59	40–49	30–39
NS_SEC 1	10.61	13.16	15.24	16.83
NS_SEC 2	11.17	13.75	15.86	19.13
NS_SEC 3–5	36.98	35.99	35.45	33.03
NS_SEC 6–8	41.24	37.09	33.45	31.01

encouraging extra-curricular activities). One consequence is that educational reforms aimed at some degree of equalization of outcomes often prove to have quite different results. In their assessment of how the 1944 Education Act affected educational inequality, Halsey, Heath and Ridge (1980: 210) wrote ‘Secondary education was made free to enable the poor to take advantage of it, but the paradoxical consequence was to increase subsidies to the affluent’. Later, writing of UK Higher Education expansion in the late 20th century, Blanden and Machin (2004: 230) concluded that the expansion had ‘disproportionately benefited children from relatively rich families. ... the expansion acted to widen participation gaps between rich and poor children’. This is not only a UK phenomenon: studying the consequences of the expansion of tertiary education in Sweden in the second half of the 20th century, Jonsson and Erikson (2010:125) found that ‘new educational opportunities are to a large extent used by middle-class students with mediocre grades but high educational aspirations.’

There is a range of differences in how, and how much, parents invest in their children (Richards et al. 2016) with middle class parents being more likely to adopt the ‘concerted cultivation’ of their children, spending more time encouraging their children in structured activities that help develop their skills, abilities and interests. Around 7% of secondary school pupils in England are privately educated: they are overwhelmingly drawn from high income and high wealth families (see the commentary in this collection by Green 2024). Students from the highest family income decile have a likelihood of attending a private school five times greater than students from the second highest decile and over 10 times greater than students at the median (Green et al. 2017: 30). Meanwhile, private tutoring or ‘shadow education’, having long been thought to be a characteristic only of East Asian educational systems, is increasing in popularity in the UK (Kirby 2016:2). It has been estimated that 27% of 11–16 year-olds in England and Wales have had some private tuition. This was the case for 34% of children in ‘high affluence households’ compared with 20% of students from low affluence households (Sutton Trust Private Tuition Polling 2019).

Many elite, influential positions in the UK – politicians, CEOs, judges, journalists – are held in disproportionate numbers by people who attended a private school and/or Oxbridge (Sutton Trust/Social Mobility Commission 2019; Green 2024, fig. 1). Although elites are, by definition, small in number, how elites are constituted can have far reaching consequences for society.

In a democratic society, elites must be so constituted that they will effectively serve all sectors of society, not just themselves. ... the inequalities in power, autonomy, responsibility and reward they enjoy ... [should] ... redound to the benefit of all, including the least advantaged. This requires that elites be so constituted as to be systematically responsive to the interests and concerns of people from all walks of life (Anderson 2007: 596, parentheses added).

Clearly, this will not happen if elites are drawn from restricted sections of society. There are obvious practical, ethical, and political obstacles to directly limiting what parents can do for their children (Brighouse and Swift 2016) but parental influences on children’s education might also be restricted by minimizing the payoffs to the things that families do to improve their children’s prospects. Some policies aimed at this goal, such as the removal of private schools’ charitable status, might command widespread support, but others, such as the use of random selection to choose among qualified applicants for University, are unlikely to prove politically acceptable if, as seems to be the case, they are perceived as detrimental to the prospects not of a minority, but of a sizeable share of the population (Bukodi and Goldthorpe 2018: 216–18).

Persistent concern

The concern to address inequalities in education is as persistent as the inequalities themselves and has driven a great deal of policy, especially focused on the organization of schooling. These changes have done little to ameliorate inequality.

The desire to weaken the link between social background and educational outcomes has often been justified on economic (concerns over a ‘wastage of talent’) and social policy (a ‘just society’) grounds. A number of large-scale reforms of the schooling system have had, as one of their goals, the equalizing of education among those from different backgrounds. The 1944 Education Act led to the introduction of free secondary education within a tripartite structure of grammar, secondary modern, and technical schools. Starting in the late 1960s and early 1970s they were gradually, though not entirely, replaced by comprehensive schools. The late 1980s saw the beginning of a move towards greater school autonomy and accountability, with the goal of making schools more ‘effective’; this culminated in the academies programme in the early 2000s. Today 70% of secondary schools and 30% of primaries in England are academies. Each of these changes has been in response to the perceived failure of what went before and this has led some commentators to a somewhat pessimistic conclusion: ‘Samuel Johnson once famously described remarriage as “the triumph of hope over experience”. It is a maxim which might equally well apply to reforming schools’ (Gray 2005: 89).

Policies addressing schools are inherently limited by the fact that, on average, much more variation in pupil outcomes occurs within than between individual schools. This has been widely known (though sometimes forgotten) since at least the Coleman report in the US in the 1960s (Coleman et al. 1966). Typically, between 5% and 20% of the variance in educational outcomes lies between schools with the remainder lying between individual pupils. In a comprehensive English study using the National Pupil Database, Rasbash et al. (2010) found that, conditioning on twin status and results at Key Stage 2 (age 11) exams, 14% of the variation in performance at GCSE (measured as a points score as used in school performance tables) lies between schools and so 86% lies between pupils in the same schools. Up to half of this between-pupil variation could be accounted for by genetic and family environment influences. This does not mean that schools do not matter, but it does give a sense of how much they can matter.

A major focus of policy has been on seeking to ensure that all pupils attain an adequate level of education by bringing up the bottom of the distribution and reducing the attainment gap between pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and the rest. The pupil premium is an important element of this approach, as are interventions within schools focused on pupils who fall below performance benchmarks in early Key Stage tests. But

while the proportion of pupils from poorer backgrounds (as measured by eligibility for free school meals) achieving grade 4/C or above in English and Maths GCSE has increased modestly over the past decade, the proportion of pupils not eligible for free school meals who have attained the same level of education has increased by virtually the same amount. Educational gaps between students from different social backgrounds are unlikely to narrow (except at the lowest levels) without a reduction in the impact of families (positive as well as negative) on their children's achievements.

Education and adult outcomes

Educational inequality is often of concern because of its consequences for adult outcomes, not least inequality in living conditions. There are reasons to be cautious in our expectations of how much educational equalization can reduce inequalities in adult outcomes.

Educational attainment is associated with a vast range of adult outcomes including earnings, family income, occupation, fertility, marriage, health, voting, criminal behaviour and so on: to what extent can reducing inequality in education reduce inequality in these outcomes?² Clearly, this depends on the outcome in question, but the degree to which the variation in an outcome is associated with variation in education is central. Although education is the strongest single predictor of adult income, earnings, socio-economic status, and class, there is, nevertheless, a great deal of variation in these outcomes among people with the same education. Gregg et al. (2019), using the BCS70 data which includes detailed information on cohort members' education, including degree subject and higher education institution attended, were able to explain 39% of the variation in sons' lifetime earnings, but their predictors include not only these detailed measures of education but also IQ, childhood skills, parental income, and early labour market experience. Britton et al. (2016) report considerable variation in adult earnings among English students who graduated in the same subject and among those who graduated from the same University. Differences in earnings among people with the same education are due to some extent to differential selection of students (into subjects and institutions, for example) and so not all of the association between education and adult earnings is causal. Even if it were, the substantial residual variation in earnings between people that is unrelated to education suggests there are limits to how far education can help to equalize adult earnings.

The variation in earnings that exists, even controlling for detailed educational measures, is itself linked to social background. 'When we take account of different student characteristics, degree subject and institution attended, the gap between graduates from higher and lower income households is still sizeable, at around 10% at the median' (Britton et al. 2016: 55). In the study by Gregg et al. (2019) the average unconditional association between parents' income and child's lifetime earnings was estimated to be 0.383. Conditioning on the measures listed above it was 0.255, a one-third reduction, showing that differences in social origins strongly affected lifetime earnings among men

who had the same detailed education, IQ, childhood skills and early labour market experience.

Education and social mobility

Education is often advanced at the key to social mobility both for individuals and society. But the British experience over at least the last 50 years has been of educational expansion but little change in social mobility.

Intergenerational mobility is concerned with the relationship between a person's adult status and the status of their family when they themselves were growing up. In economics the status in question is usually income or earnings; in sociology it is a measure of occupation, such as social class. Research by economists suggests that, by the standards of comparable developed countries, intergenerational mobility in the UK is low; studies by sociologists place it somewhere in the middle rank. There is some evidence that economic mobility may have declined during the second half of the 20th century. The results of sociological studies suggest that, although rates of absolute upward mobility (people occupying a class position higher than that of their parents) have declined, relative mobility (the association between social background and occupation) has remained more or less constant.

Education's role in social mobility is as a mediator of the overall association between social background and life outcomes, which is to say that some of the link between social origins and destinations comes about through the relationship between social background and education, on the one hand, and between education and adult outcomes on the other. Social background is related not only to the educational level someone attains but also to differences in education within broad educational levels. At the tertiary level, for example, differences in degree subject or institution attended are related to social background partly because social background affects earlier educational performance, which acts as the gateway to the subjects that can be studied and the institutions a pupil can attend. But social background also has a direct influence because pupils with the same level of performance at, say, A-level, make choices about their subsequent education that differ according to family circumstances.

The association between social background and life outcomes is not entirely mediated via education: not all variation in life outcomes can be accounted for by education, no matter how finely it is measured, and some of the remaining variation is linked to social background. Nevertheless, it seems to follow that, if educational outcomes were equalized between people from different social backgrounds, those from more disadvantaged backgrounds would be able to compete for jobs on a more equal footing and this would be beneficial for intergenerational mobility. Yet the history of educational inequality and social mobility in Britain shows that this did not happen. In part, this is because, as we have seen, there was little or no equalization of education, but also because of the persistent role of non-educational factors, themselves linked to social background, in the labour market.

In the three decades after the World War II, many European countries saw high rates of absolute upward social mobility and increasing relative mobility (a weakening of the association between social background and occupation). But this was during a period of unprecedented expansion of managerial and professional jobs. This greater 'room at the top' meant that people from less advantaged backgrounds could be upwardly mobile without necessarily excluding children from advantaged backgrounds from such positions. In the later decades of the 20th century,

² This is different from wondering how far improving educational attainment can affect the average of adult outcomes though some of the same considerations apply. A caveat is also required. Here I focus on occupation-related outcomes, but, for some of the other outcomes with which education is associated, acquiring more education may be beneficial for a person, irrespective of its benefits for others.

however, these structural changes ebbed and the situation that now prevails in England and Wales—unchanging relative mobility and diminishing upward mobility (at least for men)—is also true of many other European countries (Breen and Müller 2020).

Conclusion: education is not a panacea

Education is the most important single, individual predictor of adult incomes and earnings. It follows, therefore, that inequality in educational attainment will be associated with inequalities in incomes and earnings, as well as with other important outcomes, such as health. As Farquharson et al. (2024) point out, tackling educational inequality calls for an approach that considers the educational system as a whole. But this holistic view should also extend to the embeddedness of the educational system in the wider society. This is not just a question of recognizing that families matter, in the sense that family background strongly shapes educational attainment and that much of the variation in adult earnings and incomes that education does not explain is linked to family background; it is also a matter of understanding the wider consequences of any proposed educational policies. Families, for the most part, try to act in the best way for their children and better-off families can do this most effectively. The issue for them is to at least maintain the gap between their offspring and their offspring's potential competitors and to this end, middle-class parents have been able to take advantage of reforms whose original goal was the reduction of class differences. As Goldthorpe (2016: 105) has pointed out, advantaged parents, 'will not ... simply be passive in relation to the expansion or reform of the educational system'; they will use their resources to maximize the benefits and minimize the perceived harm to their children from educational reforms. It is only in this light that it is possible to understand the persistent failure of educational reform to reduce class inequalities in attainment and, perhaps, to gain some insight into how best to proceed.

The remarks I have made about educational policy and inequality should be taken as a counsel of realism rather than despair. History suggests the need to be aware of the limitations of policies that focus exclusively on schools and the educational system; many interventions will fail and those that succeed, while valuable insofar as they improve the educational outcomes of disadvantaged children, may have little impact on educational inequality. We should treat with caution claims concerning the power of educational reform to lead to a more equal or more socially mobile society.

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DATA AVAILABILITY

Access to data is restricted.

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