EDUCATION, SOCIAL DIFFERENTIATION AND SOCIAL INEQUALITY

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1. Education as a Right and as an Element of Social Stratification

Social differentiation can be found in all human societies. Societies are divided into ranks corresponding to the social positions that they have for their individual members. These ranks are based directly or indirectly on the division of labour and influenced by the historical context. This vertical hierarchy is called “social stratification,” a concept that is usually applied to studies of structural social inequality. These are studies of any systematic inequalities between groups of people, which arise as unintended consequences of social processes and relationships. The major variables in this respect are social class, gender and ‘race’ (or ethnic group). Gender and ‘race’ cannot be reduced to social class.

In contemporary societies education is one of the most important elements of social stratification because the knowledge, skills and attitudes learnt in school are considered to be important for the sustaining and development of any society. However, basic education is also a social right as stated for example in the United Nations’ Declaration of Human Rights. Every individual should have right to education regardless of her/his social class, income and place of residence. Globally, we are far from this goal, as nearly one third of the world’s adult population remains illiterate. Yet in industrially developed societies, equal opportunities to education have become realised quite well in many regions.

However, justice is not the only reason for the expansion of education, but the ideology of meritocracy plays a major role (Halsey et al. 1997, 632). Meritocracy has become the major justification for the process of socialization, selection and control exercised by educational system. According to the principles of meritocracy, individuals should be treated in accordance with their abilities. It should be allowed to all individuals to make efforts for their success on the basis of their personal abilities. To use an equation:
Meritocracy has proved its usefulness in several ways. Associated with economic growth, it has justified the selection of individuals to positions in the labour market. Associated with morality, it has offered the criteria for student selection. Associated with culture, it has justified homogenisation despite ethnic and religious differences. There is no controversy between meritocracy and equity as far as equal merits mean equal successes. So, the principle of equal opportunities based on meritocracy has been very useful in many ways to nation states and their governments, and also to employers and corporations.

Compulsory education and basic education are, however, every citizen’s rights, which is a part of the larger principle of equal opportunities in any society. Issues such as competition, success and market should belong to secondary, higher and adult education. In the post-World War II period that Halsey et al. (1997) call “Economic Nationalism,” educational equality has become one of the central goals of the education policy in many countries. Especially social democratic governments have seen education as a major equalizing force. Because of educational expansion the numbers of female students and students from lower social classes and different ethnic backgrounds have increased tremendously. In terms of relative and relational differences, however, inequality remains with us and has at times even increased.

2. Definitions of Educational Equality

As Oxenham’s list below shows, many sources can be found for inequality:

1) The genetic inheritance of individuals in terms of the variety of constellations of abilities, which are differently valued by societies and inequalities in specific abilities important for scholastic education.

2) The social class of individuals in terms of perceptions of the values of education for life goals, actively securing education and assuring its quality, discouraging others from education, utilizing what education is made available, and succeeding in education.

3) The political power of governments, social classes, and individuals in both providing and securing education.

4) State and private resources for the provision of education.
5) The allocation of resources between levels of education.
6) Differences in the provision of resources, efficiency, and attainment between educational institutions and group of them.
7) Differences between teachers in effectiveness.
8) Direct and indirect costs to households in utilizing education.
9) Selection for different levels of education.
10) The allocation of resources between generations. (1997, 447)

So, there are at least four major areas that need to be considered in education policy:

1) provision (quantity and quality of education available, organization of education system),
2) access (selection and its criteria),
3) utilization (meaning of education in a person’s life), and
4) outcomes (degrees, performances and their definitions. While the perfect equality of outcomes may be both impossible and undesirable, it is justified to analyse outcomes.

We can identify a narrow (conservative) and wide (radical) definition of educational equality depending on whether an intervention into the conditions of inequality is included in the definition of equal opportunity (Husen 1972). A narrow or conservative definition means that equal opportunities are realised when formal restrictions to and barriers of access to education, usually defined in legislation, are deleted. A wide or radical definition allows interventions into students’ cultural, linguistic or social disadvantages. These interventions, which can be understood as unequal treatment for equal aim, should be justified.

One way to assess equal opportunity from a wide perspective is to compare the distributions of students and graduates by social class, sex and ethnic group to the corresponding distributions in the whole age group. This practice is common in social research as is connecting this analysis to intergenerational social mobility by including parents’ social and cultural background.

The highly optimistic view of the role of education in reducing social inequality prevalent in the 1960s and early 1970s has not become a reality. A more pessimistic view is expressed in Shavit and Blossfeld’s (1993) book *Persistent Inequality*, a comparative study of education and intergenerational mobility in thirteen countries. Of the countries studied, only in two some levelling
of differences by social class in attainment to higher education had taken place. This is also the case with relative difference: numbers of students from lower social classes have, of course, increased remarkably.

3. Explanations of Inequality

Why has educational inequality been so persistent? Several reasons can be found to explain the question. On the comparative level, studies like Shavit and Blossfeld’s indicate that the patterns of social mobility are very similar in countries where market economy and nuclear family are central social institutions (Dronkers 1997). My more personal remark is that the case seems to have been quite similar also in the socialist countries of Eastern and Central Europe that participated in the comparative studies. Does it mean that a nuclear family is a sufficient condition to inequality or are there other explanations?

In addition to the existence of market economy, accelerated economic competition and globalization have influenced social inequality in general and thus also educational inequality, albeit more indirectly. This is the case in Finland, and I understand that it seems to be the case in Russia as well (Konstantinovski 2003).

The Nordic welfare societies are interesting cases. In Shavit and Blossfeld’s study Sweden and Holland were the countries where some slight levelling down in different social classes’ participation in education was found to have happened. This is due to the equalization of the standard of living and life-style rather than the democratisation of school systems. While Norway and Finland did not participate in the study, Lindbekk (1998) and Kivinen, Ahola & Hedman (2001) show that a slight levelling down has taken place in Norway and Finland. What kind of tentative conclusions can we make? First, all of these countries have a clear state regulation and control in education. While there are private schools besides public schools in the Netherlands, the former are controlled by the state. Second, there is a high public funding in education based on taxes collected by the state.

The difference between women’s and men’s educational attainment has also decreased in the Nordic countries. In fact, there is a female majority among people with secondary and higher education in some countries such as Finland. To understand the increase in the number of women in
education one must consider, in addition to the structure of the educational system, recent economic, demographic, social and cultural changes in contemporary Europe (Jonsson 2003).

An international research group has studied the case of Sweden in a more detailed way (Erikson & Jonsson 1996). Their first conclusion was that Sweden is not very different but merely an extreme case within the same pattern. Second, equalization has not touched all social classes in the post-World War II period. In a detailed statistical analysis of the survey data, two variables explained more than 50% of the correlation between social class and participation in education in all countries. These variables are school achievement and attitude to transitions. While school achievement was the first explaining variable, in cases with the same level of achievement, attitude to transition became to play a key role. Readiness to continue in education depended on the assessment of individual costs of education, probability of success and expected future benefits. The assessment of the probability of success and benefits was more significant when applying to secondary education, and the costs were more significant in applying to higher education.

In several studies – including my own studies on educational life courses and life histories – it has been shown that since the early school years an individual often follows the cultural manuscript of her/his social class and its way of life, with related images of self and personal abilities. Theoretically, Pierre Bourdieu’s (1990) concept of habitus as a system of cognitive (‘eldos’), ethical and moral (‘ethos’) and body (‘hexis’) schemes and dispositions could explain this phenomenon. Habitus is not based on homo economicus nor a corresponding restricted theory of action. It is not a mechanist concept but refers to the generative and creative nature of the disposition system. The first habitus, primary habitus, is formed already in early family socialization. The secondary habitus acquired at school and among peers may be different, but it is not without struggle against structural constraints. Often, the change of habitus requires a change in one’s life course in the form of a challenge or crisis.

Concerning the distribution of educational opportunities in a society, the Bourdieuan approach is an example of such models where economic, cultural and social resources – also known as financial, human, cultural and social capital – are regarded as intermediate factors between family background and the student’s educational career. These mediating variables – resources or capitals available in the family – are measures of various mechanisms that may influence academic achievement (Dijkstra & Peschar 2003; see Appendix 1.).
References


Dronkers, J. 1997. Social Mobility, Social Stratification, and Education. In Saha, L.J. (ed.).


Appendix 1. Models of Educational Opportunities. (Dijkstra & Peschar 2003, 60-61.)

Figure 1. Basic model of educational opportunity.

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competencies

family
background
academic achievement
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Figure 2. Basic resource model of educational opportunity

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competencies

resources

family
background
academic achievement
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- an indicator of human capital: the parents’ education
- an indicator of cultural capital: the cultural knowledge and attitudes of a family (that benefit an educational career)
- an indicator of social capital: trust, norms and members of networks of a family (that benefit an educational career)