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# **Educational Expansion, Poverty Reduction and Social Mobility: Reframing the Debate**

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## **Abstract**

This article will examine the role of education in alleviating poverty in a context of high rates of income inequalities. It will argue that despite public attention on the incomes of top earners, education policy has been largely silent on the education of elites. Rather it has focused on extending opportunities to those at the other end of the income distribution. By improving school performance and widening access to higher education, it is claimed that poverty can be alleviated by increasing rates of social mobility from disadvantaged families. Much of this debate is consistent with a human capital view of 'learning equals earning' which assumes that either supply will create its own demand or that technological change is skill-biased, leading to a raising demand for a more qualified workforce. Therefore, through investing in education there will be more opportunities for those previously excluded to experience social mobility, providing that they can develop the employability skills demanded in the labour market. This article will highlight several problems with this analysis that amount to a fundamental contradiction at the heart of education policy as a route to poverty reduction.

## **1. Introduction**

This article will examine the role of education in alleviating poverty in a period of high rates of income inequalities. It will argue that despite public attention on the incomes of top earners, education policy has been largely silent on the education of elites. Rather it has focused on extending opportunities to those at the other end of the income distribution. By improving school performance and widening access to higher education, it is claimed that poverty reduction can be achieved by increasing rates of intergenerational social mobility for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Much of this policy discourse is consistent with a human capital view of 'learning equals earning' which assumes either that supply will create its own demand, or that technological change is skill-biased, leading to a rising demand for a more qualified workforce. Accordingly, education is seen to reduce the risk of poverty on the proviso that students develop the employability skills demanded in the labour market. This article outlines several problems with this analysis, which amounts to a fundamental contradiction at the heart of education policy as a route to poverty reduction. We argue that in respect to poverty reduction the education system is significantly constrained in its potential to 'compensate for society' (Bernstein, 1970), but this does not mean that education is a waste of time or resources (Caplan 2018): rather, our argument points to the need for a more holistic and contextual theory that recognises educational reform as a 'complementary condition' (Levin and Kelley 1994) for increasing social justice and individual well-being.

## **2. Education, Social Inequality and the False Promise of Social Mobility**

As is well known, at least amongst social scientists, social and economic inequality differs from place to place but is increasing in many of them (Piketty 2014). There is also a growing

body of evidence highlighting the negative impact of high levels of inequality of income and wealth on individuals, institutions and societies (Atkinson, 2015; Dorling, 2014; Sachs, 2005; Stiglitz, 2012; Therborn, 2013). Increases in social and economic inequalities have produced urgent calls for greater social mobility. For example, in the UK in 2011, the then Deputy Prime Minister declared that social mobility was the 'principal goal' of social policy for the government (Ball, 2017). More recently, social mobility was described by the UK Secretary of State for Education in terms of a moral imperative, and he declared it a 'core purpose' of the government department that he led (Heselwood, 2018, p. 6). However, just six months earlier, the UK Social Mobility Commission (2017) stated that there was '...currently no overall strategy to tackle the social, economic and geographical divide that the country faces' (p. vii), and the Commission's Board members resigned on the grounds that there had been a lack of progress on the part of government to improve social mobility.

On a more international stage, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has been vocal and persistent in drawing attention to the nature, causes and implications of inequality and its relationship to social mobility. In *A Broken Social Elevator? How to Promote Social Mobility* (OECD 2018a), they provide an extensive account of inter-generational and intra-generational social mobility in both developed and emerging countries. The major finding is that equality of opportunity is undermined by increasingly stark inequalities of outcome, with a general trend since the 1990s towards declining income mobility. Furthermore, 'earnings mobility prospects tend to be...weaker in countries where inequality is high, and stronger in countries where inequality is low' and there are 'no countries which combine high inequality with high mobility' (ibid, p. 35).

It is argued that these increasingly 'sticky floors' and 'sticky ceilings' have many highly negative consequences. Economic growth, life satisfaction and well-being, social and political cohesion, and the extent to which people identify with democratic values are all in various ways at stake. Alongside its comparative and aggregate analyses of data on a range of indicators, the OECD report also finds evidence of changing attitudes and perceptions:

'In this context, it is not surprising that there is a growing perception in opinion surveys that societies and economies have become less mobile and this is fuelling growing dissatisfaction with the economic system and hindering social cohesion and political enchantment' (ibid, p. 20).

Linked to the OECD's broader *The Framework for Policy Action on Inclusive Growth* (e.g. 2015; 2018b), and recognising the more or less universally declared country-level policy goal of maximising equality of opportunity, the Report (2018a) presents justifications for policies that might contribute to reversing or mitigating these trends, with education continuing to be a prime site for intervention. Targeted public spending on the most effective educational initiatives is the strategy that is viewed as most likely to make a positive difference. The approach is illustrated with a series of examples from different countries, covering a wide range of activity, including: childcare and early childhood education; investing specifically in low-performing schools in disadvantaged areas; avoiding early tracking and selection based on ability; managing school choice to avoid segregation; designing and providing more routes that are equivalent to the academic pathway in upper secondary; preventative measures to reduce school drop-out; dedicated support for school-to-work transitions; improving access to higher education of under-represented groups (including the possibility of 'class-based affirmative action or contextual admission' (p. 45); enhanced lifelong learning opportunities. Finally, the Report offers an equally long list of policy tools that can be tailored to 'country-specific conditions' to:

'help them address one of the defining challenges of our time: promoting social mobility...This is key to fostering a more dynamic, innovative, and most importantly, inclusive and fairer economy and society' (OECD 2018a, p. 56).

These OECD Reports acknowledge it cannot be assumed that educational investments lead to higher rates of social mobility, despite a correlation between past spending on public education and higher current educational mobility in some countries. They also acknowledge that some existing educational policy and practice may *exacerbate* social inequalities, a point we return to below. But there are other serious difficulties with this approach. One is that it relies upon, and perhaps promotes 'policy borrowing' (Raffe 2011) of the sort that often flows from the outcomes of PISA (and other international student assessment comparisons), such that important contextual differences are oversimplified and large parts of the world are considered to be 'a commensurate space of School system performance', with specific countries taking on the role of the 'reference society' (Sellar & Lingard, 2013, p. 464; see also Sahlberg, 2011; 2016). However, whilst important, this is not our immediate concern in this article. Here we will examine the role of education in poverty reduction to expose the false premise on which much of the international policy debate is founded.

### **3. What's wrong with current approaches to education and poverty reduction?**

There is a telling sleight of hand evident in the OECD account described above. Concerns about inequalities in income and wealth are translated into the problem of stagnant or declining social mobility. Despite reference to 'sticky ceilings' and 'opportunity hoarding', the approach generally recommends actions focused on segments of the lower end of the income distribution. It is redefined as a question of breaking the 'cycle of deprivation' by giving those from disadvantaged backgrounds more of a chance to compete with those from prosperous families because, by encouraging them to raise their aspirations and take advantage of widening access to education they can rise to the ranks of the middle classes (Brown 2013). This 'deficit model' loses sight of elite reproduction and stops short of exploring the relational dimensions, such as the dynamic inter-dependence of the social and economic processes that appear to be making the rich richer, and the poor poorer (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009; Piketty 2014).

'Sticky floors' are thus disconnected from 'sticky ceilings', and the strong implication is that a policy focus on the former will somehow resolve the problems of the latter, or to put it differently, the reproduction of elite privilege. The fundamental problem of poverty reduction is repositioned as one of 'fairness', ensuring that regardless of circumstances individuals have an equal chance to be unequal, regardless of how large the prizes offered to the winners. Here poverty reduction is individualised rather than treated as a collective problem which is part of the material foundations of society. Below we outline four related reasons for doubting the veracity of policy claims that education reform offers the best route to removing barriers to upward social mobility and poverty reduction, especially in a context of educational, occupational, and economic transformation.

#### *3.1 Human capital and the labour scarcity view of social mobility*

Most educational reforms aimed at poverty reduction such as those prescribed by the OECD continue to be premised on human capital assumptions. Although there are different strands to the theory (Lauder, et al. 2018), they share the same policy solutions which view educational investment as offering the best prospects for achieving poverty reduction through increasing educational opportunities and narrowing wage inequalities (Goldin and Katz 2008). Gary Becker argued that:

'instead of assuming that differences in earnings mainly reflected whether workers held "good" or "bad" jobs, the human capital approach assumed that earnings mainly measure how much workers had invested in their skills and knowledge. According to this view, earnings would rise with the amount invested in education and training. On this interpretation, good jobs are mainly jobs held by workers who have invested a lot in their human capital' (Becker, 2011, xiii).

Becker, along with Schultz (1993), also argued that educational investment offered a universal theory, applicable to both developed and emerging economies as a way of tackling educational disadvantage.

More recently Hanushek and Woessmann (2015) attempted to refine this model by arguing that the standard measures of human capital, based on years of education or level of attainment (qualifications), are inadequate because 'the amount of learning per year of schooling varies dramatically across countries' (p.27). They also argue that qualifications do not capture the range of cognitive skills that contribute to individual productivity, especially in a context of rapid technological change. But investments in education remain key because 'improvements in school outcomes lead to added GDP growth that could dramatically change the future prosperity of a country' (p.173). Likewise, much of the recent economics literature on the impact of new technologies and automation of occupational roles has focused on the relationship between skills and changing job tasks. Again, education is viewed as key to increasing labour market opportunities and reducing income inequalities, assuming that the education system can be reformed to meet these rapidly changing needs of industry (Autor 2015; Schwab 2016).

Here we want to argue that the central thesis of human capital theory is fundamentally flawed because it is based on a labour scarcity model, whereas poverty reduction needs to be studied from the perspective of job scarcity (Brown, Lauder and Cheung, forthcoming). A labour scarcity model assumes that income distribution in market economies rests on citizens possessing (or acquiring) 'a bundle of valuable "human capital" that, due to its scarcity, generates a flow of income over the career path' (Autor 2015: 28). In contexts where there are increasing numbers of occupational opportunities requiring higher levels of educational achievement, labour scarcity may offer a viable policy approach. Indeed, the increasing investments in education systems in North America and Europe in the second-half of the twentieth century were widely assumed to explain relatively high levels of social mobility in the United States and Europe.

But today's labour markets, in both developed and emerging economies are characterised by a highly contingent relationship between education, jobs and wages. It is a mistake to view educational reform as the main driver of social mobility and poverty reduction. It is not self-evident that educational success will lead to advancement in the labour market, as Ball, suggests we have been offered:

'a kind of fantasy economy with places for everyone, and located specifically as a responsibility of education...it is assumed [that] education can interrupt social reproduction, even in periods of high unemployment, and if it does not, then (again) schools and teachers are to blame' (Ball, 2017, pp 197-8).

When we approach the changing relationship between education, labour markets and income distribution from the perspective of 'job scarcity', it points to a different conclusion – a serious capacity problem within market economies and at the heart of the world's labour markets. This capacity problem is characterised by a growing mismatch between a rising supply of educated workers and a job market failing to deliver the economic prizes that a college or university education was supposed to offer to the many rather than the few.

This has important implications for understanding the role of education as an instrument for poverty reduction. Studies of intergenerational social mobility in the twentieth century show that the increasing numbers of students from less privileged backgrounds entering higher status occupations than those of their parents was primarily due to changes in the occupational structure. In other words, social mobility was the result of an increasing demand for workers in technical, managerial and professional occupations, for reasons that are, at best, marginally related to educational expansion (Brown 2013).

In today's labour markets, rather than vast numbers of new high skilled jobs, a large proportion of job openings are 'replacement' jobs, reflecting both less room at the top and the increasingly segmented ranks (rather than hollowed out) of the middle of the occupational structure (Brown, Lauder and Ashton, 2011; Holmes and Mayhew 2012). The US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013) predicted 50.6 million job openings between 2012-2022. Of these, more than two-thirds (67.2%) would come from replacement needs as existing workers shift jobs or retire, rather than resulting from new areas of economic activity creating new positions. And nearly two-thirds (65.3%) of total job openings in 2020 are expected to require no more than a high school diploma - a proportion virtually unchanged from 2012.

Perhaps of even greater significance is the impact of digital innovation on the future of work that offers little comfort to those who previously predicted a race between education and technology (Fray and Osborne 2013; Goldin and Katz 2008). Various studies have produced contrasting conclusions on the scale and timing of jobs likely to be automated. Some claimed that almost half of Americans are in jobs which could be automated over the next 10-20 years. Although such claims are exaggerated there is little evidence to suggest that new technologies will create more jobs than they replace.<sup>1</sup>

If there is a growing problem of job scarcity, the major source of social mobility will depend on equalising relative life-chances or what Erikson and Goldthorpe (1993) call social 'fluidity'. Therefore, equalising opportunities for all would entail more downward mobility as middle-class students make room for high-achieving students from working class backgrounds. As Goldthorpe and Jackson (2007) suggest, 'sustaining rising rates of upward mobility through greater fluidity must mean creating a society in which downward mobility likewise becomes a more common experience, far more so in fact than in the postwar decades.' (p.542).

In considering the role of education in poverty reduction, it is therefore worth reflecting on the fact that even in a period of political consensus, where there was a widespread commitment to organise schooling on a more equal footing (Halsey 1972), there was little evidence that post World War II educational reforms resulted in a significant weakening in the relationship between social background and education outcomes. If 'education played little part' (Goldthorpe and Jackson, 2007: 542), in achieving levels of social mobility achieved in the second-half of the last century, it is difficult to see how the educational system can be organised to achieve poverty reduction today in less favourable economic and political circumstances. This especially applies to countries that have applied market policies in education, giving parents the freedom to use their material and cultural resources to win a competitive advantage, in what has become an increasing global competition.

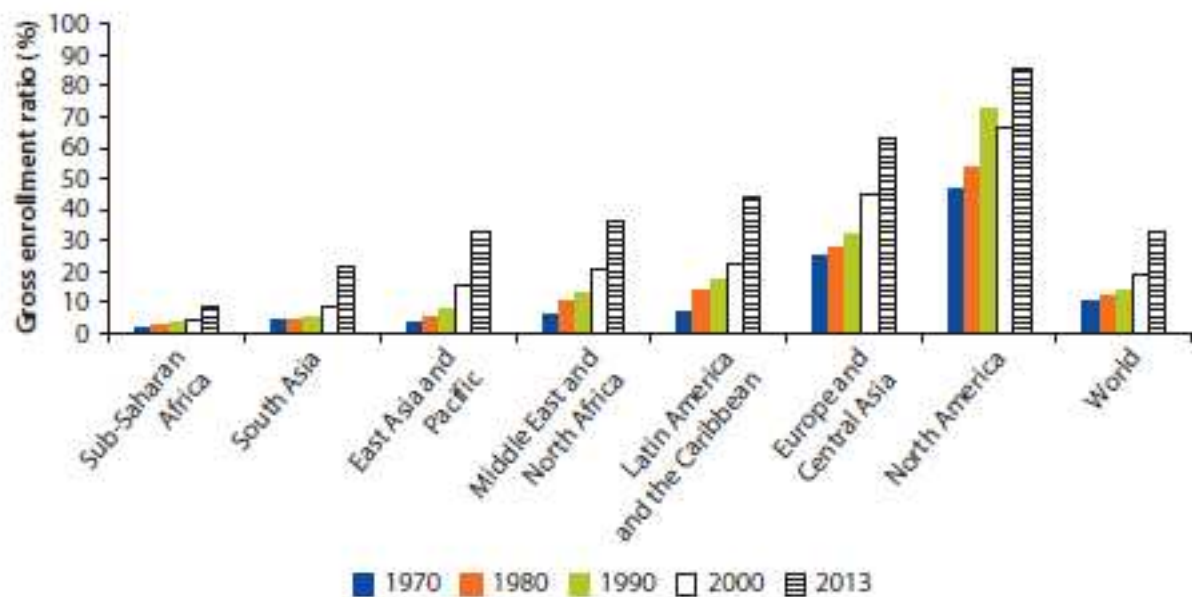
### *3.2 The expansion of higher education has created increasing social congestion: 'trading up' or 'bumping down'?*

International data shows significant rates of growth in higher education, driven by the idea that expanding and widening access can boost productivity at the same time as contributing to social justice. Although the idea that giving students from disadvantaged backgrounds a college or university education as a way to reduce poverty and social deprivation is obviously appealing, it may signal a misunderstanding of the role of educational credentials

in the labour market. It ignores the fact that tertiary qualifications operate as *positional goods* (Hirsch, 1976; Brown, 2000, Adnett & Davies, 2002; Hall, 2012) at least as much as they are taken as a proxy for knowledge or skills. So powerful is this dimension that according to some US-based research, attending a ‘rust belt’ higher education institution comes with a ‘reputational affect’ which is then likely to confirm or consolidate a limited trajectory (Stich, 2012; James, 2014).

Although there has been a global explosion in tertiary education (See Figure 1.), it may do little or nothing to change the relative position of people in the competition for high status universities and jobs, and could in fact worsen the chances of some. The world’s most prestigious higher education provision is dominated by students with privileged backgrounds (Marginson, 2016), and whilst processes of admission differ in detail, research comparing selection practices in the United States and UK demonstrate parallel and deeply ingrained and cultural and social assumptions (Mountford-Zimdars, 2016). Research focused on the most prestigious ‘Russell Group’ universities in the UK also shows that after decades of policy initiatives (including explicit institutional ‘access agreements’ with a government agency), students from lower class backgrounds and from state schools remained much less likely to apply to elite universities than equally qualified higher class and privately-educated students. These social class effects are compounded by different rates of acceptance, especially by ethnicity (Boliver, 2013; and see Boliver, 2017; James, 2018).

Figure 1. Growth in enrolments (percent) in global higher education.<sup>2</sup>



Source: Calculations are based on UIS data.

The end result is that the expansion of higher education has led to increasing social congestion in the labour market due to what we have described as job scarcity (Brown 2013). If there are not enough of the jobs people expect in return for the time, effort and money spent on pursuing higher education, there is an increasing mismatch between what is required to get a decent job and what it required to do a decent job. This signals a fundamental crisis in the selection (or sorting) role of education as the political commitment to keep the opportunity bargain alive confronts the realities of the contemporary labour market.

Credential inflation (Collins 1979) is symptomatic of increasing social congestion in the competition for 'distinction' (Bourdieu 1984), fuelling the growth in both undergraduate and postgraduate study as a way of achieving a positional advantage. Bourdieu (1984) observed that:

'The overproduction of qualifications, and the consequent devaluation, tend to become a structural constant when theoretically equal chances of obtaining qualifications are offered to all the offspring of the bourgeoisie (regardless of birth rank or sex) while the access of other classes to these qualifications also increases (in absolute terms). The strategies which one group may employ to try to escape downclassing and to return to their class trajectory, and those which another group employs to rebuild the interrupted path of a hoped-for trajectory, are now one of the most important factors in the transformation of social structures' (p.147).

These positional imperatives explain why expansion of higher education is judged by some as a welcome extension of educational opportunities, but by others as a threat to those whose families have benefited from education as a route to relatively high paying jobs. This explains why universal higher education has social consequences, or as Hirsch notes 'the key to personal welfare is...the ability to stay ahead of the crowd. Generalized growth...increases the crush' (1977:7).<sup>3</sup>

In *Education and Jobs: The Great Training Robbery*, Ivar Berg (1973) also points to the consequences of mass higher education in America for those who do not get a college or universities education. He argued that educational credentials had 'become the new property in America', putting in place a 'heritable set of values...which will most certainly reinforce the formidable class barriers that remain' (p.183). Acknowledging that there were some benefits to employers of having higher educated workers, Berg observed that the increasing use of higher educational credentials as a screening mechanism 'effectively consigns large numbers of people, especially young people, to a social limbo defined by low-skill, no-opportunity jobs in the peripheral labour market' (p. 183).

This analysis seems even more pertinent today. In the context of an over-supply of qualified applicants, employers' continued preference for recruiting those with higher qualifications and other forms of cultural capital results in a new and more pernicious version of the 'great training robbery' that Berg identified. There is a 'bumping down' process where over-qualified middle classes are taking lower skilled and more precarious employment, and a consequence of this is to push out those with low academic qualifications, even if they could do the job to a satisfactory level of performance. This process is fuelled by the distinction between graduates and non-graduates. But to understand the implications of this 'robbery' for poverty reduction, we need to see the theft as double-edged. Not only does it undervalue those without a graduate qualification, but it is also a form of robbery from those who have made substantial investments of time, effort and money to gain a college or university education but who have not received the job or income they were encouraged to strive for (Keep and Mayhew, 2004).

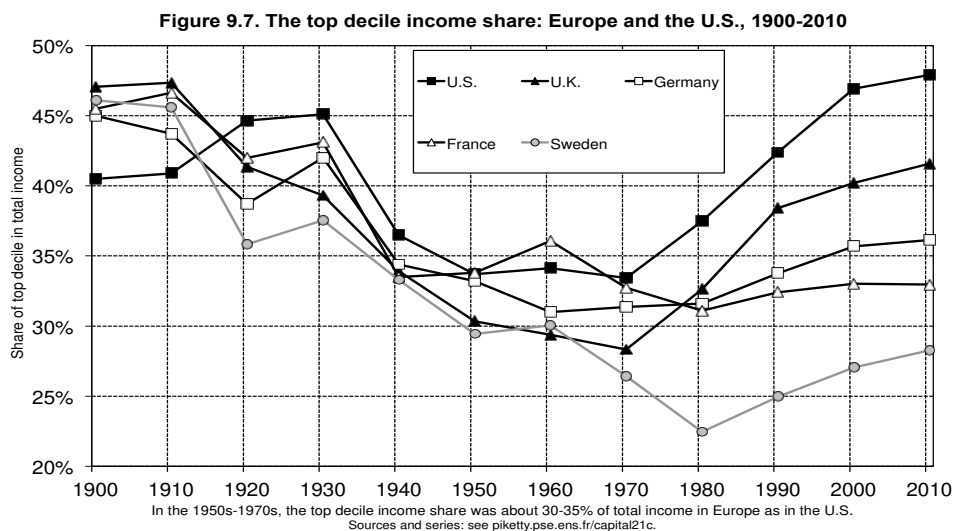
### *3.3 Outmoded assumptions about the nature and causes of inequality*

A further difficulty with contemporary education reforms to alleviate poverty stem from a failure to move beyond the human capital assumption that income inequalities reflect differences in individual marginal productivity. Where in the past it may have seemed plausible to attribute the distribution of incomes to education (as 'investment in human capital' or perhaps as credentials functioning as a reasonable proxy for ability, capacity or productivity), detailed analysis of income distributions (using tax data) over time and across countries throws such assumptions into serious doubt. Here, the work of Piketty presents a direct challenge to conventional thinking. Piketty questions the conventional 'wisdom' that



inequality decreases as a consequence of economic growth in advanced capitalism ('Kuznet's Curve'); he demonstrates that over time, wealth has become more important than income due to high (and concentrated) savings and low growth; and argues that because inequalities in capital are always greater than those in income, inequality overall will soon reach 19<sup>th</sup> Century levels once more (Moeller & Tarlau, 2016). Piketty argues that the more equitable income distributions visible in the middle of the twentieth century, which have normally been taken as evidence of the 'rising tide' of growth benefitting most people, including through investment in education, were primarily due to the effects of two world wars and the changes in the occupational structure noted above. Of most significance here is his demonstration that the dramatic 'recovery' of elite incomes since the 1970s, particularly visible in Anglo-Saxon countries, reflects increases in top salaries rather than overall returns on capital.

**Figure 3: Income inequalities in five western economies (Piketty 2014: Figure 9.7)**



Roine has spelt out the implications of this for how we understand education:

'...it is striking how much of the income growth is driven by the very top (the top one percent, or even the top 0.1 percent). If education was the determining factor behind the growing inequalities, we would observe a much broader upswing across the whole upper part of the distribution...Given this development, we have to seek out explanations for how a small number of people, who are admittedly often well-educated, have come to earn so much more of the total in recent decades...' (Roine, 2017; 48-9).

Piketty's explanation of this latter point does acknowledge that the roles of the highest paid executives (he calls them 'super-managers') may have become more complex with increases in firm size. In other words, they are benefiting from the expansion of transnational companies such as Apple, Google, IBM, etc. into global markets. However, his analysis also points to a 'failure of corporate governance and...the absence of a rational productivity justification' (Piketty 2014, p. 334). Piketty's view is that to understand inequality we must look well beyond the tools of economics, to political, cultural and global shifts in social norms, including the role of market ideology justifying low rates of personal and corporate taxation. He mentions the strong possibility that the explosion of top incomes is a form of 'meritocratic extremism', which refers to the way some societies appear to need to identify specific individuals as 'winners' and to provide them with very high rewards if 'they seem to have been selected on the basis of their intrinsic merits rather than birth or background' (ibid). He also points to the significance of the highest paid executives setting their own salaries, and to tax laws which, since 1980, have provided strong incentives for them to demand ever higher incomes, especially in United States and United Kingdom, notwithstanding significant national differences in the distribution of income shown in Figure 3.

Although income inequalities have been growing in Sweden they remain much lower than the United States or United Kingdom. This helps us to understand why poverty reduction needs to focus on the redistribution of income and wealth, rather than the false promise of increasing rates of intergenerational social mobility through educational expansion. We've shown that even the OECD recognises that no countries has combined high inequality with high mobility, but in failing to recognised the close relationship between 'sticky floors' and 'sticky ceilings' they downplay the detrimental impact of inequality on individual quality of life as well as life chances.

Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) compared 21 rich countries by plotting the level of inequality against an index for health and social problems (which include life expectancy, homicides, low educational achievement, obesity, mental illness, and others). Having shown that there is no general association between the incidence of such problems and average income in these rich countries, they go on to demonstrate a strong and positive correlation between these problems and inequality. Their analysis suggests that inequality has pernicious effects, such as eroding trust, increasing anxiety, encouraging excessive consumption, and damaging health. Furthermore, they suggest that for eleven different areas of health and social problems, outcomes are significantly worse in more unequal countries, whether these are rich or poor. Most central to our current concerns, Wilkinson & Pickett highlight the need to narrow inequalities in income and wealth to have any chance of alleviating poverty:

'...the quality of social relations...is built on material foundations. The scale of income differences has a powerful effect on how we relate to each other. Rather than blaming parents, religion, values, education or the penal system, we...show that the scale of inequality provides a powerful policy lever on the psychological wellbeing of all of us...both the broken society and the broken economy resulted from the growth of inequality' (pp. 4-5).

### *3.4 Education as panacea*

In his discussion of meritocracy and social mobility, Ball draws attention to deep-seated political and ideological divisions around educational means and ends, and to the production of a strong rhetoric in which education framed in 'traditional' terms is presented as the 'answer' to some of the very divisions it has generated. Here, debates about the whole range of life-chances are (safely?) confined to the nature of educational provision and individual responses to it. For Ball, this idea of social mobility is more 'slogan' than 'concept', 'focusing attention on the "problem" of schools rather than the problem of the economy' (Ball, 2017). Nevertheless, we've show how education as a route to poverty reduction via social mobility persists as a widespread view, and its plausibility is no doubt bolstered where policy rhetoric emphasises meritocracy, individualism and the role of market competition. Yet we would argue that it is also the nature of education as a social institution that makes such a view of social mobility appear legitimate. There are two aspects to consider, namely the sheer breadth of endeavour subsumed under the heading 'education', and the extent to which, at least in developed capitalist societies, education may be a vehicle for the reproduction of social (including economic) inequalities.

Educational activities can of course support fundamental and largely positive changes for individuals, societies and economies. For example, the role of education in social and economic development is broadly well evidenced. The Global Partnership for Education and the World Bank Group have overseen investments of many billions of dollars designed to help realise Millennium Development Goals agreed in Dakar in 2000, such as the provision of universal primary education and promoting the empowerment of women<sup>4</sup>. At least in the terms of mainstream economic models, the evidence for educational investment as a basis for economic growth has also produced some positive results (Montenegro and Patrinos, 2014). But arguments for and about education are not confined to economics.

There are many different perspectives and conceptualisations of education that contribute to our understanding of its significance for people and the lives they have. For example, a celebrated and influential analysis is to be found in the work of the Brazilian educator Paulo Friere (e.g. 2005). For Friere, educational activity was never 'neutral' (that is, it produces *either* conformity to existing subjugation, *or* empowerment), and the literacy programmes he supported in Brazil and elsewhere were a vehicle for radical social change amongst oppressed groups. In richer countries too, the effects of education in changing the lives of some individuals are readily apparent, and the potential for transformation is central in much of the research-based literature on adult education, especially that in the broadly humanistic psychological tradition (e.g. Mezirow, 1991; Brookfield 1987).

Recent research on higher education inspired by the work of Sen and Nussbaum considers labour market implications alongside a more comprehensive list of capabilities which contribute to human flourishing (e.g. Boni and Walker, 2013), though other (sociological) work has revealed the stresses and strains that can dominate experiences for those whose backgrounds do not include a familiarity with going to university (Bathmaker et al, 2016; Reay, 2017). Such perspectives show us that the lived realities of education – and the actions, hopes, ambitions and outcomes under that umbrella term - add up to a wide range of meanings beyond those that have been most central to economics and also to much policy thinking about social mobility.

It must be acknowledged too that educational provision itself has *interests* (in the Bourdieusian sense), and whether or not driven by explicitly instrumental considerations, educational provision often *presents itself* as a panacea, making strong claims about its potential to alter life-chances. Added to the sheer breadth of simultaneous purposes and goals under the umbrella term 'education', it is perhaps unsurprising that some of it may contribute to perpetuating an individualised, deficit view of social mobility.

A final reason that the 'deficit' concept of social mobility appears persuasive is that it chimes with the strongly *individualised* view of what educational activity entails, achieves or is capable of achieving (James, 2015). It was Friere that distinguished his radical concept of 'conscientization' from what he termed the 'banking' concept underpinning mainstream education, which champions individualised acquisition. To the extent to which schools focus on such investment in the self, they may lead their students to anticipate a world of work in which it is expected that the individual's level of income will be the marker of worth that trumps all others. It is well evidenced that despite exceptions, educational institutions also tend to reproduce (or help to reproduce) the large economic and social differences across the backgrounds of learners in a process that many sociologists have sought to understand. In Bourdieu's analysis this relies on 'conversion' between economic, social and cultural forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986). For a recent analysis of how such processes work at the 'top end' in the UK, see Freidman & Lauriston (2019).

### **Conclusion: Reframing the Debate on Education and Poverty Reduction**

This article has identified some of the key reasons why the education system is extremely limited in its powers to reducing poverty and increase intergenerational social mobility. The standard policy formula of *widening educational access* → *increasing social mobility* → *poverty reduction*, does not stand up to close scrutiny and may have unintended consequences that serve to undermine the stated purpose of educational reform.

This does not mean that education is a wasted investment (Caplan, 2018) or simply an institutional instrument for social reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). But it does mean that education needs to be studied as an integral part of a more holistic and contextual theory that recognises educational reform as a 'complementary condition' (Levin and Kelley 1994) for increasing social justice and individual well-being.

In Levin and Kelly's example of education's contribution to economic competitiveness and productivity, they reject the 'one factor' view that characterise, 'the present view that education almost single-handedly, can solve problems of productivity and competitiveness of the US economy,' because most of the empirical evidence shows how other factors determine outcomes that make the one factor approach 'hopelessly naïve and even dangerous' (1994: 245).<sup>5</sup>

In the study of education and poverty this is highlighted by a consistent failure to acknowledge the sociological distinction between 'absolute' and 'relative' dimensions of intergenerational social mobility, which have different implications for the role of education in poverty reduction. In circumstances where there are increasing (absolute) numbers of occupational opportunities and not enough qualified people to fill them, the education system can play an important role in extending access to students from less privileged backgrounds in preparing them to benefit from emerging occupational opportunities. However, when the primary source of social mobility depends on the reform of education systems to shift the 'relative' odds of academic success in favour of those from poorer backgrounds - in competition with students from more privileged families - there is very little evidence that education has succeeded in compensating for social inequalities. Therefore, when thought of as a complementary condition in the study of education and poverty we should acknowledge the entire range of reforms that are necessary to increase social mobility and reduce poverty.

Here our analysis points to a poverty of ambition. It is not by chance that much of the focus on poverty reduction through educational reform has been on tackling 'sticky floors' rather than 'sticky ceilings'. For established political parties it is often expedient to address what are defined as the pathological behaviours of the poor rather than the pathologies of market

capitalism. Applying educational solvents to sticky flours can also be presented as a positive agenda in helping more tadpoles to become frogs, to use Tawney's analogy (see below). But the politics of 'sticky ceilings' is politically far more challenging as it poses a direct threat to the interests and expectations of the middle classes and social elites. Policies aimed at increasing downward social mobility as a complementary condition for enabling able students from poor backgrounds to access better jobs is always going to be difficult to attract mainstream political support (Ehrenreich, 1990; Atkinson, 2015).

These sticky political issues are served by confluences and confusions between different concepts and ideas about equality – especially equality of opportunity, equality of condition, and equality of outcome (Swift, 2004). A. H. Tawney (1964) described the limitations of focusing on equality of opportunity rather than the equality of condition – the extent to which positions are unequal. He championed a principle of equal worth, and saw any system tying education to wealth as a 'barbarity'.

He also thought it simplistic and unrealistic to advocate the equalisation of opportunities in any crude sense. For Tawney (1964), the main reason 'equality of opportunity' is flawed comes from a morally inadequate valuation of human beings. Tawney named this the 'Tadpole Philosophy', the parallel being that only a small minority of tadpoles become frogs. According to this philosophy 'the conditions and needs of all were regarded as secondary to the opportunities available to a few' (Wright, 1987, p. 73). However, Tawney's key point for current purposes is that a just society is not only judged by the level of social fluidity measured by trends in upwards and downwards social mobility but by the quality of life enjoyed by those who are not socially mobile. It is the quality of life of all, including those living in poverty that should shape the role of education (Brown 2013). Moreover, the relationship between *equality of opportunity* and *equality of condition* is not universal or fixed in time. Recent trends in occupational and economic restructuring point to significant changes in the relationship between them that need to be investigated in comparative terms to identify the shifting relationship between education and poverty.

A consequence of education providers buying into the myth that education can compensate for society, is that it will ultimately be held accountable for a promise it can't keep. It also sidesteps consideration of all the mechanisms that are implicated in current levels of inequality and poverty. But it also represents a missed opportunity to reframe the debate. We need to consider the role of education in *generating* inequality, or even *concealing* important dynamics by, for example, reifying individual ability or consolidating narrow notions of deficit.

In addition to the wide range of skills and capacities it already nurtures, education has a role in helping all young people to better understand the mechanisms that operate to foster inequality. This may include a critical understanding of the way certain assumptions derived from economics find their way into policy; it may also entail challenges to the role of education itself, or to the idea that more education is always a good thing.

If we take seriously Tawney's point that social justice is ultimately about the quality of life enjoyed by those who are not socially mobile – including many of those living below the poverty line – it points to a transformation of education purpose consistent with UNESCO's goal of 'ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all by 2030.'<sup>6</sup>

This is not simply wishful thinking but a rational response to the collapse of industrial society on which current models of education are based. Our analysis shows that poverty reduction not only depends on a high-quality education for all but a significant redistribution of income, wealth and educational life-chances. Equally, today's climate emergency not only points to a different kind of technological future in which our understanding of work will be totally

transformed, but to an education emergency as a complementary condition for the transformation of human society, rather than simply holding out the prospects of a better economic future to a few more tadpoles.

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Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For a review of some of the key issues see Brown, P., Souto-Otero, M. and Lloyd, C. (2018) The Prospects for Skills and Employment in an Age of Digital Disruption: A Cautionary Note, Centre on Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance, SKOPE Research Paper No.127, November 2018, <http://www.skope.ox.ac.uk/?person=the-prospects-for-skills-and-employment-in-an-age-of-digital-disruption-a-cautionary-note>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2018/01/10/figures-of-the-week-higher-education-enrollment-grows-in-sub-saharan-africa-along-with-disparities-in-enrollment-by-income/>

<sup>3</sup> These positional consequences are, of course, not only true for individuals but also organisations such as universities. The proliferation of universities in Britain has led elite institutions to find ways such as higher student fees, attracting world-class scholars, and monopolising research funds, to re-impose their elite status, because exclusivity is a necessary facet of positional advantage, given that success is meaningless without failure.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/education/brief/the-global-partnership-for-education-and-the-world-bank-group-the-facts>

<sup>5</sup> Complementary inputs include investment, in new technologies, new methods of work organisation (especially those based on teams, rotation, greater worker discretion), and new managerial approaches (especially involving greater integration of research, training, product development and so forth). Levin and Kelley argue that ‘...the empirical evidence from employer studies suggests that workers do need to meet a minimum threshold of achievement in order to perform adequately on the job’ (p. 243), and they point to a large group of students in the US who were not meeting this level.

<sup>6</sup> See <https://en.unesco.org/education2030-sdg4> [accessed 17th June, 2019] and UNESCO’s Education for All, <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/archives/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/education-for-all/> [accessed 18<sup>th</sup> June, 2019]