

Does schooling increase or decrease social inequality?

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At the present moment it is certain that the school, while being a “training and educational” institution, is at the same time a piece of social machinery, which tests the abilities of the individuals, which sifts them, selects them, and decides their prospective social position.

—Pitirim Sorokin, 1959

Considering the enduring question in educational sociology of whether experience in school increases or decreases social inequality can bring a new perspective to the analysis of school policy. This article adds to the debate by proposing a causal framework that I developed with Robert Eschman for explicitly stating and evaluating claims about the contribution of schooling to social inequality. We use a counterfactual model to synthesize findings from four different types of interventions studied over the past century: universal pre-kindergarten, extending the school day, extending the school year, and increasing required years of schooling.¹

What is social equality in education?

A widely held belief is that the purpose of schooling is to produce knowledge, dispositions, and capacities—skills—that are useful in the labor market and in life. An efficient school, like a firm that produces high profits, generates skills equated with high test scores. The function of the public schooling system is to promote a common skill set for all students, though some schools are better than others at promoting skills and students vary in their capacity to obtain these skills.

After passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965, the key objective of U.S. education policy has been to reduce social inequality in educational opportunity. Reauthorization of this Act in 2002 mandated sanctions against schools whose low-income and minority children had low test scores.

However, despite the attempts over the past half-century to reduce inequality, it has persisted. Theories offered to explain this persistence include that schools are a weak force, particularly compared to parents or homes, or that schools actually perpetuate inequality.² Some argue against school investment as a path to reducing inequality, stating that the home environment is more important than the school

environment, and that increased investment alone has not been effective in raising student achievement.³ However, these arguments are not grounded in a causal model for schooling.

A causal model

Robert Eschman and I contend that past models of schooling outcomes are missing a counterfactual—what would occur if a child did not attend school. We propose that the effect on a particular outcome that can be attributed to school depends on the quality of instruction the child will experience at school, compared to that they would experience if they did not attend school. This child-specific model leads us to hypothesize that expanding universal publicly funded schooling will reduce inequality both through providing access to more students, but also because disadvantaged children will gain more from that access than will their more advantaged peers. We also predict that this equalizing effect will be larger for younger children than for older children.

Research evidence

These hypotheses are supported by a review of the evidence for four types of interventions: (1) increasing access to early schooling, (2) extending the school year, (3) lengthening the school day, and (4) increasing the number of years of required schooling. First, our review of 15 large-scale studies of early schooling in eight countries indicates that preschool reduces inequality because children of low socioeconomic status gain more than do children of higher socioeconomic status.⁴ Second, evidence suggests that social inequality grows during the summer months, with effects that are large and cumulative, and that extending the school year helps to close this gap.⁵ Third, instructional time can be increased by extending the school day. The evidence is mixed about whether such an expansion is of greater benefit to low-income children, though there is evidence that students from low-income families gain more from full-day kindergarten than do other students.⁶ Finally, the number of years of compulsory schooling could be increased. Increasing secondary schooling does reduce inequality by reducing the gap in access to school. However, as predicted by our model, among these older students, those from low-income families benefit less from a year of secondary schooling than do those from higher-income families.

Policy implications

One might conclude from prior research that it is worth investing in interventions to reduce inequality only when

children are young. However, it is important to note that early investment increases skill levels for low-income children, thus delaying the onset of skill differentiation between low-income and higher-income children, and prolonging the period during which school is operating as an equalizing force in their lives. In this way, early schooling increases the capacity of later schooling to reduce inequality.

The quality of schooling available to low-income students is lower than that available to higher-income students; however, because the counterfactual (the quality of instruction they would receive in the absence of school) is so much worse for children from low-income families, those students gain more than their higher-income peers, even from this lower-quality schooling. Therefore, if the quality of schooling available to low-income students could be increased, this would multiply the effects of the early interventions, raising skill levels even more.

There is good reason to expect that a dynamic instructional model with a relentless commitment to student learning can produce dramatic and lasting results. Such a model would involve smaller class sizes, frequent assessment of students, and individualized instruction that incorporated a variety of tools as needed, such as one-on-one tutoring. Evidence that such an approach can work comes both from research on effective charter schools, and recent work I have done with colleagues Elizabeth McGhee Hassrick and Lisa Rosen.⁷

A dynamic instructional model builds on emerging evidence that more and better early schooling equalizes early skill, and increases the benefit of later instruction for those of low socioeconomic status, while more and better later schooling capitalizes on early skill gains, delays the emergence of skill inequality, and sustains the capacity to learn. It appears that schooling can have a powerful equalizing effect despite, or even because of, the fact that there is such great disparity outside school walls.■

⁷W. Dobbie, R. G. Fryer, Jr., “Getting Beneath the Veil of Effective Schools: Evidence from New York City,” *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 5, No. 4 (2013): 28–60.; E. M. Hassrick, S. W. Raudenbush, and L. Rosen, *The Ambitious Elementary School: Its Conception, Design, and Implications for Educational Equality* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2017).

¹This work is described in greater detail in S. W. Raudenbush and R. D. Eschmann, “Does Schooling Increase or Reduce Social Inequality?” *Annual Review of Sociology* 41 (2015): 443–470.

²See, for example, J. S. Coleman, *Equality of Educational Opportunity*. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research, 1966; and S. Bowles and H. Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: Education Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1976).

³E. A. Hanushek, “School Resources,” in *Handbook of the Economics of Education*, Volume 2, eds. E. A. Hanushek and F. Welch (Amsterdam: North Holland, 2006).

⁴Raudenbush and Eschmann, “Does Schooling Increase or Reduce Social Inequality?”

⁵K. L. Alexander, D. R. Entwisle, and L. S. Olson, “Lasting Consequences of the Summer Learning Gap,” *American Sociological Review* 72, No. 2 (April 2007): 167–180.

⁶C. H. Gibbs, *Measuring the Impact of Full-Day Kindergarten: Experimental and Quasi-Experimental Evidence*, Doctoral Dissertation, University of Chicago, Harris School of Public Policy, 2010.