

# Features of Educational Systems as Factors in the Creation of Unequal Educational Outcomes

Jaap Dronkers

## Introduction

This chapter provides a review of the most important processes that influence inequality in and around education, describing current research in this area to the best of my ability.<sup>1</sup> Cross-national comparisons play an important role in those parts of this chapter, which discusses system effects. This review is based on my own interpretation of the “state of the art” in empirical research on education and inequality. The aim of this chapter is to give perspective to the importance of meso- and macro-features of educational systems in the creation of unequal educational outcomes.

## Processes that Contribute to Educational Inequality

The factors and processes that influence the development of education inequality can be categorised into seven key concepts: *ability, social background, segregation between schools and neighbourhoods, teaching conditions in schools, public and hidden differentiation, the relationship between the highest level of education and the labour market and the relationship between education and other social sectors*. These concepts are discussed in order of their contribution to educational inequality; the most important concepts are discussed first, followed by those that are less important.

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J. Dronkers (✉)

Research Centre for Education and the Labour Market/ROA, Maastricht University,  
Tongersestraat 53, 6211 LM Maastricht, The Netherlands  
e-mail: j.dronkers@maastrichtuniversity.nl

<sup>1</sup> This chapter expands on a lecture given on 11 November 2006 at the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in Berlin for the “Scholars for European Social Democracy” conference on education, which was based on my own views concerning the “state of the art” in empirical research on education and inequality.

## *Ability*

Differences in ability (broadly speaking, differences in intelligence and personality) develop during the first years of life. Differences in intelligence and personality are the result of the continuous interaction between biologically based (but not, yet, fixed) individual potential and environmental stimuli (initially from the biological parents, but later from other significant people as well). The first years of life are extremely important. After this time, most differences have become set in fixed reaction patterns and repertoires, or they are stored in neurological patterns and “hardware”. By intelligence, I mean cognitive intelligence, within which a number of components can be identified (e.g. verbal intelligence, spatial intelligence).<sup>2</sup> By personality, I mean the five factors that are prominent in personality theory: neuroticism, extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness and openness to experiences.

Differences in intelligence and personality are already apparent in a child’s first year, but these differences are not, yet, very stable. Because people tend to react more quickly to potentially active children, these children receive more stimuli in return, thus, developing even further and faster. The interaction between individual and environment means that small differences between newborns can grow to become substantial and fixed differences within just a few years. Although scientists have, yet, to reach consensus concerning the stage at which differences in ability become fixed, it is clear that the last major determination takes place during puberty, whilst a significant amount of differentiation in ability has already taken place before primary school.

School is, therefore, often the place in which differences in ability (which were formed in the family) first manifest themselves publicly, but it is not where they are created. Because the primary school environment is often analogous to that of the family, the interaction between individual potential and environmental stimuli is more likely to be strengthened in school than it is to be neutralised. This does not mean, however, that differences in the social background (as expressed in parental educational level and occupation) are the same as these early differences in ability. Social background and ability are related because children receive a mixture of biologically based (but not, yet, fixed) potential from their parents at birth. In general, parents with higher levels of education and more respected occupations are more capable and, therefore, better able to transmit potential to their children<sup>3</sup> through their genes<sup>4</sup> and the environment they can create. On average, these higher educated

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<sup>2</sup> All fashionable variants of intelligence and creativity have serious drawbacks; some cannot be measured reliably, others bear a striking resemblance to cognitive intelligence, and yet others are affected by one of the factors of the personality model.

<sup>3</sup> Homogamy (see section “Relationship Between Inequality in Education and in Other Social Sectors”) in the educational level of partners contributes further to the transmission of this biologically based potential ability.

<sup>4</sup> The exact genes have yet to be identified, although it is clear that many different genes are involved in differences in intelligence.

parents are also better able to provide a stimulating environment for their children, who therefore tend to develop further, even if these children have less potential. These observations, however, refer to averages, chances and regularities, and not to any unchangeable law. Some highly educated parents with highly respected jobs may find their ambitions and careers more important than raising their children, thereby failing to provide them with the right environment. Similarly, lowly educated parents may do all they can do help their children advance in society through education.

The relationships between parental ability, a stimulating environment and early ability in children are therefore positive but not deterministic. Education became increasingly open to capable students from the lower strata during the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> In the early twentieth century, lack of financial and social support prevented most capable students from the lower strata from continuing their education; at the end of the twentieth century, however, almost all capable students from the lower strata were able to enter higher education. For this reason, at present (at the beginning of the twenty-first century) the number of capable, but lowly educated parents has dropped (except amongst immigrants from non-industrialised countries).<sup>6</sup>

Ability is positively valued and rewarded in education and society. This is not unusual, as it contributes to greater productivity, both for the individual and society as a whole. In education, this means that intelligent students, regardless of their social backgrounds, have a greater chance of achieving high levels of education than do less-intelligent students from comparable environments. This also applies to the labour market; intelligent people are more likely to achieve success (e.g. to have more highly valued jobs and higher income) than less-intelligent people from comparable environments and with similar education.<sup>7</sup> In short, greater ability contributes to success in both education and society, and this success can be attributed only in part to the social background. Moreover, the effect of ability, measured at the start of primary education,<sup>8</sup> on ultimate educational attainment (in sociology, this effect is known as the primary effect of the social background) is greater than the effects of the social background during the rest of the child's school career (i.e. the secondary effect of the social background). In practise, this means that the causes of differences in ability can be addressed very effectively in the first few years of life. The problem, however, is that direct intervention in intimate family life, whether by or on behalf of society, is regarded as morally irresponsible and unfeasible.

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<sup>5</sup> This was accomplished by removing major financial barriers and applying more universal performance criteria to selection decisions in education.

<sup>6</sup> This phenomenon accompanied the disappearance of lowly educated trade union leaders who climbed up through the trade unions.

<sup>7</sup> Intelligence and personality are of even greater importance to the success of women and migrants on the labour market because social limitations (e.g. the relative positions of men and women, discrimination, non-recognised diplomas or other migration-related transaction costs and cultural differences) limit their opportunities for exploiting their educational level on the labour market.

<sup>8</sup> Standardised measurements of ability are not reliable before the age of five.

The increased openness of education to students from the lower strata that resulted from the removal of financial barriers also had a side effect whereby it became necessary and possible for students of average ability from the higher strata to further their education. After all, they were threatened with social decline if they completed *relatively* insufficient education, in comparison with the increasing numbers of capable lower-stratum students. The cultural capital of parents (e.g. help with homework and papers) became an important resource for these students, both in finding loopholes in education and in the assessment of the non-material and material costs and benefits of educational choices. Because of this parental cultural capital, students with average ability from the higher strata are ultimately more likely to achieve a high level of education than are capable students from the lower strata. The clear and public assessment of personal achievement in education, therefore, gives students from the lower strata a chance to prove their abilities, thereby providing them with more opportunities. Such assessment is actually a risk for students of average ability from the higher strata. Without parental support, they are more likely to fall short; likewise, educational systems that have hidden selection mechanisms offer these students more opportunities to use their parental capital.

### ***Social Background and Other Social Divisions***

A child's chance of a successful educational career is influenced by the social background, which consists of two important dimensions (i.e. characteristics that are related, but not interchangeable): the occupational level of the parents (in most cases, the father) and the educational level of both parents. These characteristics can also be called parental financial and cultural capital. As the concept of capital suggests, this discussion does not refer to brief fluctuations in income and cultural participation, but to the long-term availability of resources. The influence of the social background on success is not limited to the school career; along with ability and educational attainment, it also plays a role in success on the labour market, particularly at the start.

The influence of the social background on success in education changed during the twentieth century. In particular, the occupation of a father (measured as the status or attractiveness of the occupation, as expressed in terms of educational requirements and financial rewards) now has less influence on the educational success of his children. The increased openness in education that followed the removal of financial barriers is one plausible explanation. Nonetheless, the educational level of parents continues to bear a major influence on the educational success of their children. This is partly so because parental educational attainment has become a better indicator of their actual ability. The number of lowly educated, but capable non-immigrant adults has decreased in response to the same increasing openness in education. Although this does apply to the educational level of fathers, it is even more pronounced with regard to the educational level of mothers.

Compared to parental occupation and education, other characteristics of the social background are less important in the educational careers of children. In comparison with the effects of parental educational attainment, parental occupation and children's early ability, temporary unemployment or short-term fluctuations in income bear hardly any influence on children's success at school. This is partly due to the success of most European continental welfare states, which are able to cushion the immediate effects of temporary unemployment and poverty, and partly because the chance of long-term unemployment and permanent poverty is directly related to the status of the previous occupation and educational level. Long-term unemployment and poverty during the time that children are in school are often caused by poor education or low parental ability, together with the associated limitations on the parents' ability to get their lives back on a more positive track by themselves. Such parents may, therefore, remain below the poverty line or find themselves permanently unemployed in response to certain events (e.g. divorce or widespread unemployment), thereby contributing to further negative effects on the educational success of their children.

Other less important background characteristics that influence the way children function in education include the ethnic origin of immigrants, religious contrasts,<sup>9</sup> the city-rural contrast and single motherhood, particularly if it is the result of a broken relationship with the biological father. Although these characteristics do play a part in increasing inequality of educational opportunity, their negative effects are less prominent than are those of parental occupation and educational attainment. In terms of successful education, students are better off with highly educated, but divorced parents than they are with lowly educated parents who still live together happily. It is important to note that the effects of these other social factors are more susceptible to change than are factors related to the social background. For example, the classic lack of educational opportunity in rural areas as compared to urban areas had all but disappeared by the end of the twentieth century in a number of European countries; educational opportunity has even improved in non-metropolitan areas. Since the mid-twentieth century, new inequalities in educational opportunity have emerged for the children of migrants and single mothers.

To achieve a better understanding of the significance of the social background for educational opportunities, one should interpret education as a career, which students follow with varying levels of success. An educational career consists of transitions between different types of education. Such transitions usually involve selection.<sup>10</sup> Unequal educational opportunities actually consist of unequal selection and unequal

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<sup>9</sup> Such contrasts include the contrast between a more secular, hedonistic lifestyle and a more religious lifestyle. With regard to inequality of educational opportunities, a more religious lifestyle is more of an advantage than it is a disadvantage, as such lifestyles are often accompanied by discipline and cultural capital that can be translated into educational success.

<sup>10</sup> These transitions include the transition from primary school to the first phase of secondary education, the transition from the initial phase of secondary education to one of the various types of secondary school.

choices during these transitions. Proven ability (as reflected in high marks) and the social background both play a role in each of these transitions. This role is larger if a selective transition<sup>11</sup> occurs at a younger age, when parental characteristics weigh more heavily than the student's wishes and possibilities; its importance decreases during later transitions. This explains why the social background is more important in educational systems that have early, irrevocable selection than it is in other educational systems with a first selection at an older age.

Finally, characteristics of the social background are more important than even the most important school characteristics (i.e. the segregation of pupils according to ability and social background) are in determining inequality of educational opportunity.

## *Segregation Between Schools and Areas*

### **Reasons for Segregation**

The extent of segregation between schools and areas is a third factor that influences inequality of educational opportunity. The term segregation is used here in its technical sense, and it refers to the extent to which the ability composition of particular schools or areas deviate (i.e. with regard to social background, ethnic origin, religion, family type or similar factors) from the average school or area within a given municipality. The causes of area segregation include variations in the price and quality of housing, variations in the quality of infrastructure (including schools) in the area, the extent to which use of the infrastructure is reserved for local residents (e.g. a postal code policy for schools means good schools are accessible only to local residents), local residents' preferences and disapprovals of certain other neighbours, discrimination against some potential residents by existing homeowners, variations in opportunities to move to another area.

Factors that contribute to school segregation include students who come from strongly divergent school catchments areas (often as a result of area segregation); differences in the quality of schools; differences in parent and student perceptions of the quality of schools; preferences for certain schoolmates; variations in costs (e.g. school fees, textbooks, fieldtrips, clothing standards) associated with attending certain schools; discrimination against some potential students by school administrators, teachers, classmates and parents; rules governing residential areas and school catchments areas and variations in the ability of some groups to avoid these rules. For example, parents with more money or contacts are better able to obtain a false address in a good area (e.g. by renting a room with a family member or colleague), so that their child can be admitted to the good school in that area. Well-educated parents are more capable of convincing a good school outside their area

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<sup>11</sup> Selective transition refers to a transition that substantial numbers of pupils are unable to make successfully.

that their child needs a special programme (e.g. Russian), which is taught at that school, thereby securing admission.<sup>12</sup>

This summary of the causes of area and school segregation shows that the two forms of segregation are not identical. School segregation is usually more common than area segregation is, even in countries in which, at least in theory, there is a fixed relationship between residential area and school catchments area in the form of an admissions policy based on postal code (e.g. France). The greater prevalence of school segregation is explained by the greater ability of the higher strata to evade the rules and regulations without penalty or rectification. In countries where there is more freedom concerning choice of school (e.g. the Netherlands), school segregation is much more pronounced than is segregation between the areas in which the schools are situated.

The extent to which school and area segregation differ is not just a consequence of the availability of free choice of school, which exaggerates differences between schools. At the same time, area segregation is reduced by free choice of school, as it eliminates one of the processes that increase area segregation (the extent to which schools of differing qualities are reserved for local residents) in the choice of residential area.

Two opposing processes of segregation are, thus, relevant here. A very strong link between residential area and school catchments area can either increase or reduce the value of housing in particular areas as a result of school quality<sup>13</sup>; this increases area segregation and, indirectly, school segregation. The strong link between residential area and catchments area also hinders ambitious parents who are forced to live in poorer areas (e.g. immigrants) in choosing high-quality schools for their children, thereby limiting their ability to realise the intergenerational mobility they emigrated to achieve. A weak link between residential area and school catchments area nearly eliminates the effect of school quality on the value of housing in certain areas, thus reducing area segregation.

Increased freedom of choice for parents and students does increase school segregation, however, as higher strata are better equipped to make use of this freedom of choice. They have both more knowledge regarding the quality of schools and more resources to support their choice.<sup>14</sup> In some cases, segregation based on ethnic or

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<sup>12</sup> These two examples illustrate practice that is currently common in Paris, which is intended to allow children from the higher strata to better access schools despite the formal equality of admissions policies.

<sup>13</sup> Gabrielle Fack and Julien Grenet *Do Better Schools Raise Housing Prices? Evidence from Paris School Zoning*. Paper presented at the Summer school of the Marie Curie Research Training Network “The Economics of Education and Education Policy in Europe”. Padova, Italy, 16–18 June 2006. [http://www.jourdan.ens.fr/~fack/documents/Fack%20&%20Grenet%20\[april%202007\].pdf](http://www.jourdan.ens.fr/~fack/documents/Fack%20&%20Grenet%20[april%202007].pdf)

<sup>14</sup> Even though parents from the lower strata may have sufficient information (at least as much as parents from the higher strata have) about a good school on the other side of town, they may lack the resources (e.g. money for public transport, car, flexible working hours, personnel) to ensure the safe transportation of their children to and from school everyday.

religious origin (Islamic schools) or sex (all-girl schools) can reduce educational inequalities.<sup>15</sup>

### **Five Consequences of School Segregation**

School segregation and the composition of the student population influence inequality of educational opportunity in five ways. First, educational opportunities are affected by the curriculum level at which teachers can give lessons in schools with particular student populations. The level at which students assess their own performance relative to their classmates is a second factor. A third factor involves the amount of actual teaching time for teachers and actual learning time for students, which is reduced when time is spent on matters other than teaching or the need to repeat information that was not understood as a result of the cognitive, social, cultural, ethnic or religious composition of the student population. A fourth influence on inequality of educational opportunity is the total amount of financial, cultural and social resources that the parents of students from the specific populations can contribute to help the learning process run as smoothly as possible. A final way in which school segregation and the composition of the student population influence inequality of educational opportunity involves variations in the average quality of the teachers in particular schools.

Teachers have to consider the estimated average learning capability of their student population, if they want to be effective in their teaching.<sup>16</sup> If teachers overestimate these capabilities, few students will profit from their teaching; if they underestimate the average learning capability, the teaching level will be too low and many students will learn too little. Because teachers have to consider the estimated average learning capability of the student population, the level at which they teach also varies within the same type of education. In schools with student populations that are comprised primarily of students that teachers perceive to be very capable of learning, the education objectives and levels will be higher than they are at schools with student populations that are expected to be capable of little.<sup>17</sup>

Schools with different student populations therefore offer different actual curricula: this causes variation in their educational results (even when the starting level is equal), thus creating unequal educational opportunities. Countries whose educational systems have a national curriculum or standardised central examinations provide fewer opportunities for teachers to lower their actual teaching objectives

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<sup>15</sup> One of the reasons why segregation based on ethnic or religious origin can reduce inequality of educational opportunity is analogous to the reason why girls are able to perform better in mathematics and physical sciences in all-girl schools.

<sup>16</sup> A comparable argument can be made for adopting an individual approach in heterogeneous teaching, which offers the least capable students the option of an even lower level of instruction than is offered by the classical approach.

<sup>17</sup> This differentiation process, based on the teachers' estimation of the potentials of the students, happens also within strata. The various dimensions of social background is used by teachers to make this individual estimation of students' potential and, thus, of the level of offered curriculum.

and levels substantially. If teachers were to do this, it would be more obvious that they had lowered standards than similar adjustments would be in countries with no national curriculum or standardised central examinations. This is why students in countries or areas with a national curriculum or standardised central examinations achieve higher results. In schools with differing student populations, therefore, different levels of curricula are offered, causing variation in the results of particular schools, thereby contributing to inequality of educational opportunity.

Students compare their learning performance to some extent with that of their classmates. If the composition of the student population causes the results of their classmates to be low, it may be easier for some students to achieve relatively better assessments and, therefore, overestimate their own performance and be less challenged to improve them further. If the results of their classmates are high, some students are more likely to achieve relatively low assessments, thereby underestimating their own performance and being more challenged to improve. Whether these processes actually occur depends partly on the personalities of the students; relatively low achievements can discourage some students, and can encourage other students to put forth even greater effort. In most cases, however, the Roman proverb applies: "It is better to be the smallest amongst the eagles than to be the greatest amongst the sparrows".<sup>18</sup> In schools with differing student populations, therefore, students are motivated in different ways to achieve higher results, causing variation in the results of particular schools (even when the starting levels are equal), thereby contributing to inequality of educational opportunity.

Above all, the effectiveness of education depends on the amount of time that is available for both teaching and learning. Learning and teaching time can be greatly diminished in schools where children have problems inside or outside the home that interrupt the teaching and learning process. The same applies to settings that involve major language barriers between the students and teachers or in which time is lost because of lowly prepared or disorganised educational reforms. In student populations with generally low learning ability, the same material must be taught several times before it starts to sink in, leaving little time for going deeper into the material. In such situations, there is less learning and teaching time than necessary. In contrast, in student populations with generally high levels of learning ability, it is necessary to explain the material only once; the student's reactions automatically increase the depth of the instruction, for which there is also sufficient time. Students in strata with other capable students are, therefore, able to do better in school than are students of comparable ability in strata in which there are many less-capable students.<sup>19</sup> In fact, the learning and teaching time differs in these two situations, despite identical class schedules. Less-intelligent students, therefore, need more

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<sup>18</sup> A modern variant of this saying refers to the relative size of fish in small or large ponds.

<sup>19</sup> Although this may seem to argue for early selection, this is only the case if segregation is accepted as a fixed "natural phenomenon". Moreover, early selection is associated with other inequalities, particularly the increased effect of the social background.

scheduled lesson time to achieve the same learning and teaching time as more intelligent pupils do. This underlines the importance of sufficient learning and teaching time, especially for the less capable students.

The total amount of financial, cultural and social resources the parents can raise to help the learning process run as smoothly as possible varies according to the composition of the student population. In countries in which the financing of schools depends mostly on local taxes (as in the United States), the consequences of school and area segregation on the number of resources available to schools, and therefore teaching conditions, are drastic. Even in countries with equal school funding, however, the non-financial resources vary across the various student populations. The quality of parental participation in school activities depends in part upon the availability of these parental resources, as does the extent to which the school is protected against politically motivated interventions, even for state or community schools.

The average quality of teachers at a school (e.g. educational level, subject knowledge, experience) is also unequally distributed over schools with varying student populations, even within the same type of education. Because the effective teaching time is longer for higher quality teachers, they are able to offer their students a wider range of learning materials. The positive correlation between the average teaching quality at a school and the composition of its student population develops as schools with many problem students find it much more difficult to attract and keep good teaching staff. Teaching at a school with a difficult student population is a Sisyphean task; at some point, teachers (particularly those of higher quality) are quite likely to give up, because they have more opportunities to move to schools with better student populations. In the long term, therefore, the quality of the teaching staff in schools with unfavourable student populations tends to be lower than it is in schools with more favourable student populations. A similar selection process takes place in the recruitment of teaching staff; schools with more favourable student populations are more attractive as workplaces and are, thus, able to select the best from a greater number of applicants of generally higher quality. In contrast, schools with unfavourable student populations receive fewer applications; because the teachers who do apply tend to be of lower quality, they also have less opportunity to choose the best applicants.<sup>20</sup>

### *Teaching Conditions*

As already mentioned, the effectiveness of teaching depends on the available time, both in terms of the lessons given by teachers and material learnt by the students. This means that teaching conditions that affect these learning and teaching times influence educational opportunities. Students with weak social, cultural or cognitive

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<sup>20</sup> Although variations in the student population are obviously not the only source of variation in the quality of teachers at a school, they are an important factor. Other factors include a poor reputation as an employer, sustained disputes over a school's direction.

backgrounds depend more than other students on the quality of the teaching. These students are less able to rely on the help of their parents or their environment in the learning process. They are not able to compensate at home for shortcomings at school.

### **Favourable Conditions**

A large number of international studies that satisfy standard research requirements have identified the following teaching conditions as particularly effective<sup>21</sup>: the stimulation by teachers of good results in core subjects, the monitoring and evaluation of progress in learning, an orderly climate at school, homework and structured learning through cooperation, feedback, encouragement and incentives. These teaching conditions usually cannot be influenced by a government's educational policy. They are part of the direct teaching process and the school environment within which education and teaching takes place.

Various teaching methods (e.g. Montessori, Jena, Dalton, Anthroposophy, New Learning) try to increase the teaching and learning time, and their claimed success is based on this increase. Teaching time can be increased by extending the amount of contact time (although this tends to have decreasing returns) or by raising the effectiveness of teaching (primarily through better and more attractive teaching resources, including books, audiovisual material, computers). Learning time can also be increased by giving more homework (which also tends to have diminishing returns), by encouraging more self-study amongst students by increasing their motivation and by providing teaching materials that are more stimulating. This carries the risk, however, that the motivation will not last.

Increasing teaching time does not automatically result in more learning time, nor does decreasing teaching time automatically reduce learning time. Claims made by the supporters of certain teaching methods, including traditional teaching, may be labelled "effective" only when there is reliable scientific research that includes an appropriate correct control group. Attention should also be paid to the possible differentiating effects of these teaching methods for pupils from different strata, as some "softer" teaching methods assume sufficient ability and cultural capital that is not equally available in all strata.

Teaching conditions that are affected by educational policy, thus, bear at most an indirect influence on the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process. These conditions include class size or student-teacher ratio,<sup>22</sup> teaching staff salary levels, school size, teaching staff experience, the architectural quality of the school building. The fact that such relatively tangible teaching conditions play only an indirect role in most European countries is primarily due to the policy of equal government

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<sup>21</sup> I refer here to the work of Scheerens and Bosker (1997: 305).

<sup>22</sup> Examples include the student-staff ratio, which is between 15:1 and 35:1 in primary and secondary education. Between these values, the student-staff ratio has no systematic effect on the effectiveness of the teaching-learning process; above and below these extremes, it does.

financing of all schools of the same type. This means that the effects of the actual differences in material conditions are relatively slight and, to a certain extent, coincidental.<sup>23</sup> There are indications that teaching conditions such as many cancelled lessons due to the frequent absence or illness of teachers, the absence of qualified teachers, the use of outdated teaching material or demoralisation amongst the teaching staff, do have a direct negative influence on learning and teaching time, thereby worsening the school environment.

### **Unequal Division of Teaching Conditions**

Positive teaching conditions and a good school environment are unequally distributed over schools and are related to the composition of the student population, even in countries in which schools are equally financed. Schools with many difficult students have less opportunity to become and remain effective. The learning and teaching time at such schools is continually under pressure because time is lost on student problems that are not related to learning. The risk then arises that the teaching staff will eventually give up the fight for quality in their teaching. The chances of this happening are greater when teachers have no political or religious values that help them continue and legitimise their struggle. One of the handicaps of state education in the fight against unequal educational opportunities is that such systems of political or religious values tend to become less prevalent, as they are in conflict with the non-discriminatory character of state-supported schools.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, it is an advantage for religiously inspired schools (e.g. Islamic schools), in which the teaching staff have a clearer set of values that helps them persist in their Sisyphean task.<sup>25</sup> Giving up the fight for the quality of their school can cause good teachers to move to other schools, which prevents their former schools from providing good teaching in certain subjects for a considerable length of time and makes it necessary for more lessons to be given by less qualified and experienced teachers. This can have a demoralising effect on the remaining teachers, causing further deterioration in the educational process and school environment. For this reason, the teaching conditions in schools with underperforming student populations are often worse than they are in schools with student populations that perform well. That is why improving teaching conditions at schools with difficult student populations is so important in the fight against inequality of educational opportunity; this is where the highest returns of a deliberate educational policy can be made.

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<sup>23</sup> This is not true in the United States, however, as the use of local taxes to fund primary and secondary education creates large, systematic differences in the material conditions of schools.

<sup>24</sup> From this perspective, the disappearance of both socialistically inspired teachers and Catholic teaching brothers is regrettable, as their political or religious views helped them to persist in their Sisyphean task.

<sup>25</sup> Too much emphasis on religion, however, can lead to the selection of less qualified teachers (who, nonetheless, adhere to the right religion) and the subsequent reduction of actual teaching time or a tendency to spending teaching time on the wrong subjects, thereby resulting in insufficient actual teaching and learning time.

### **Criteria and Morale**

Schools with unfavourable teaching conditions are those that could profit most from clear criteria regarding the level to be achieved. Such criteria are included in national curricula and final examinations, which help schools to enforce their long-term teaching objectives. In the absence of such national standards, the struggle for quality and the pressure of comparative assessment can cause these criteria to be adjusted downward, without the parents and students who attend these schools (and who already have an information lag) knowing about it.<sup>26</sup>

High morale amongst teaching staff is another factor in the creation and maintenance of favourable teaching conditions. One of the best ways to maintain the morale of a team of professionals is to offer them as much freedom as possible in carrying out their jobs, obviously accompanied by equivalent financial conditions and public assessment of the learning achieved. They are best suited to match the form and content of their teaching to the potential and wishes of their students, rather than having to follow precise guidelines from the Ministry of Education, local government or head office of the group of schools to which the school belongs. This matching will vary from school to school, as well as from year to year.

This moderate variation, tempered by equal financial conditions and public assessment of the learning achieved, could generate moderate competition between schools for the students and teachers that are best suited to the school and achieve the best learning results. This competition between schools for students and teachers is not an invention of the neo-liberal 1990s; it has existed in the Netherlands since the 1960s, when religious recruitment for segregated education disappeared. This competition, together with central final examinations of secondary education and the common test at the end of primary education, is the best explanation for the relatively favourable scores of Dutch students in the cross-national PISA and TIMMS studies and the relatively low scores of students of the North German states in these studies, where there are no central final examinations of secondary education and little competition between schools.<sup>27</sup>

### ***Public and Hidden Differentiation***

One of the unavoidable functions of education in contemporary society is the selection and allocation of students according to the type of education that best suits their

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<sup>26</sup> Even if students do discover the consequences of the inferior school quality once they are in the labour market, it is usually too late and no longer possible to catch up. Furthermore, because selection is less universalistic (i.e. the same criteria apply to everyone) on the labour market than it is in education, students who are perceived as weak on the labour market fall even further behind than they did in education.

<sup>27</sup> This is in contrast to the higher TIMMS and PISA scores of students in the South German states of Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg, where a central final examination of secondary education exists.

developed abilities.<sup>28</sup> Since the 1960s, most OECD countries have debated about and experimented with delaying this selection in secondary education. Because many abhor such selection functions, the delay within secondary education can be seen as an attempt to eradicate it from the educational system. Leaving this socially inevitable selection to the labour market instead of the educational system, however, creates the chance that social inequality between students from different strata will become even greater than the inequality that exists within education. After all, selection is even less universalistic (meaning the same criteria apply to everyone) on the labour market than it is in education.

### **Early Selection for Different Types of Education**

As already noted in section “Social Background and Other Social Divisions”, the influence of the social background is greatest for selection that takes place at a young age. Parental characteristics weigh more heavily in these early transitions than do the wishes and prospects of the not-yet-independent pupil. This variation in the importance of the social background in transitions during the school career also explains why the influence of the social background is greater in educational systems with early selection than it is in other educational systems.

One of the consequences is that, in educational systems with hierarchical ordering of types of education (e.g. Germany and the Netherlands), the effects of the social background, and therefore the level of educational inequality, are greater than they are in educational systems that do not have such educational types (e.g. Finland and Sweden).<sup>29</sup> The effects of the social background are particularly prominent, as the non-material costs of various educational types are strongly dependent on the social background. In educational systems with vertical differentiation, the non-material costs of following higher educational types are particularly high for the lower strata, whilst the non-material costs of following lower types of education are higher for the higher strata.

These differences in cost for different strata are the product of differences between the life styles of students from lower strata and the social and cultural requirements of higher types of education and the social decline experienced by students from higher strata if they attend lower types of education. In educational systems with fewer hierarchical differences, there is less distance between the life styles of the students and the demands of education, and the social decline is less

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<sup>28</sup> A macro-level aspect that is associated with the allocation function of education involves the number of students of each type and level that are required in society. This issue is of little importance in OECD countries, where regulation is left to the labour market and the individual risk of students. With regard to inequality of educational opportunity, it is important to note that students from the lower strata make different cost–benefit analyses of these risks in their education choices. It is, therefore, rational for them to choose safer education types and paths.

<sup>29</sup> It is possible, however, for other characteristics of the educational system (e.g. centralised final examinations) to neutralise the negative consequences of early selection that contribute to inequality of educational opportunity.

pronounced, thus, reducing the cost differences between strata. Because of the non-material costs of various types of education (rooted in social background) and the wider significance of the social background in educational choices and transitions, inequality of educational opportunity is likely to be greater within educational systems that involve early selection and/or many different hierarchically ordered types of education.

Another characteristic of this type of educational system is that schools that offer the lower types of education tend to have less favourable student populations. Because of these differences in the composition of student populations, the five mechanisms described in section “Segregation Between Schools and Areas” also manifest themselves in these different types of education. These mechanisms magnify the unequal initial differences in the choice of educational type, thereby enlarging inequality of educational opportunity.

Finally, for cases in which the differences between the various types of education have become so large that it is no longer possible to transfer from lower to higher types, choices that are made when students are young are irreversible, and the inequality in opportunity can no longer be reduced by a later upward transfer. The various types of education also differ with regard to a number of teaching conditions, particularly the cancellation of lessons due to the frequent absence or illness of teachers, a lack of qualified teachers, the use of outdated teaching material or demoralisation of the teaching staff (see section “Teaching Conditions”). The highest types of education also have the best teaching conditions, further increasing inequality of educational opportunity between students in different types of education.

### Internal Differentiation

This does not mean that educational systems without early selection and/or without hierarchically ordered types of education do not have inequalities in the distribution of educational opportunities across comparable students from different strata.<sup>30</sup> Another, less obvious, way of carrying out student selection and allocation is differentiation within a school by *streaming* (grouping together students of roughly equal ability in a number of core subjects), *tracking* (grouping together students of roughly equal ability in a certain subject, but allowing the *tracks* to vary between subjects) and similar systems. Whether such internal differentiation takes place formally or informally makes little difference in the outcome. Internal differentiation enhances initial unequal differences in the allocation/choice of different *streams* or *tracks*, thus, also contributing to increasing inequality of educational opportunity.

The advantage of internal differentiation is that it allows for more internal transfer (in particular, transferring upward to a higher track or stream) than it does for transfer between the different types of education that are offered in different school buildings. Experience in internally differentiated schools has shown that, over time,

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<sup>30</sup> I refer here to work about streaming and tracking in the United States by S. R. Lucas (1999).

transfers downward to lower tracks or streams are more common than are transfers upward to higher tracks or streams. This is because, in internally differentiated schools, downward transfers are less costly for students, as they do not require them to leave the school and their friends. In contrast, because of a tendency toward risk avoidance (by students, parents and teachers), upward transfers take place only if the chance of success in the higher track or stream is very high. It is also easier for teachers to transfer students to lower groups, because the students are able to remain at the school, and such transfers pose no threat to school funding. Finally, students in higher streams or tracks are under less pressure to achieve good marks, as alternatives in lower streams or tracks are readily available.

The greater chance of downward transfer within internally differentiated schools, thus, provides a mirror image of the lower chance of downward transfer between types of education, which is more costly and, therefore, more difficult for both student and school. The chance of transferring downward is also unevenly distributed according to social background, as the process of weighing the costs and benefits of downward transfer is linked to social stratum. Downward transfer is more costly for children from higher strata, as it places them in a lower social standing than their parents hold. In contrast, students from lower strata who transfer downward are still at a higher or equal level than their parents are, and they, therefore, do not experience social decline.

As stated previously, upward transfer is less common, but that does not imply that it is unrelated to social background. Upward transfer is more costly for children from lower strata, as it places them at a higher social level than their parents, possibly alienating them from each other. For students from higher strata, transferring upward brings students closer to the level of their parents; they, therefore, experience less social decline than they did in the lower stream. One possible advantage of internally differentiated schools is that the most important decisions regarding upward or downward transfer are taken when students are older; this lessens the impact of the social background on such decisions. The five mechanisms described in section "Segregation Between Schools and Areas" operate also between these streams or tracks, just as they do in the various types of education. The lower streams and tracks within these schools also contain less favourable student populations, and because of these population differences, the five mechanisms also occur between the various streams and tracks.

Finally, teaching conditions vary between tracks and streams in response to internal power relations between teachers within schools and parental pressure; the highest streams have the best teaching conditions, particularly with regard to cancelled lessons because of frequent absence or illness of teachers, the lack of qualified teachers, the use of outdated teaching material or demoralisation amongst the teaching staff (see section "Teaching Conditions"). Because of the differences between streams with regard to the mechanisms, student populations and teaching conditions, the unequal initial differences in choice of stream develop further, accompanied by an increase in the inequality of educational opportunity. This also applies in educational systems with internal differentiation between streams or tracks.

As an aside, I would like to point out that it is possible to delay the selection function in primary and secondary education until entrance examinations for the following educational transition, and to trust the selective working of a school's own entrance examinations or the close relationship between area and school segregation. In such cases, schools with very homogenous student populations do not need to differentiate any further internally; they only have to prepare their students for the following entrance examination. In such a situation, the quality of the school (with regard to preparation for the next external entrance examination) is of far greater importance than the formal diploma is to the further career of the student. Systems with strict entrance selection for special schools or types of education can be found in France (*classes préparatoires*), England (public schools), the United States (prep schools) and Germany and the Netherlands (*independent classical gymnasia*). Comparative study has shown the Dutch *gymnasia* to be more socially exclusive than either the French *classes préparatoires* or the English public schools.

### Hierarchy of Disciplines

The informal hierarchy of disciplines and subjects is another form of hidden vertical differentiation in secondary and further education. In formal terms, there is no hierarchy; the status of different subjects within educational institutions and within national legislation is equal. In practise, however, this informal hierarchy functions as further vertical differentiation. The actual hierarchy can be found in differences in admissions criteria for different subjects, gender composition, required teacher qualification levels, salaries and other secondary employment conditions, student-teacher ratios, required student effort, opportunities for transferring to other courses and the labour-market chances of graduates. The most common form of horizontal differentiation in most European countries exists between vocational and general education, in both secondary and post-secondary education. Hierarchical differences also exist between subjects within vocational and general education (e.g. between electrical engineering and nursing, between mathematics and economics, between medicine or law and sociology or pedagogy).

It is important to note that no "natural" hierarchy exists between disciplines and subjects – not even between vocational and academic education. The differences in these hierarchies in the various European countries illustrate the absence of such a natural order. The hierarchy within the French system of higher education provides a clear illustration of this point; in this system, vocational education (*Les grandes écoles*) is hierarchically superior to the universities. In Germany, some students find it attractive to follow programmes in the apprentice system after they have completed their *Abitur* (final examinations); this obviously varies by business sector.

Horizontal differentiation contributes to inequalities in educational opportunities in two ways. The first effect involves the entrance criteria for various programmes of study and the necessary knowledge of this hidden hierarchy in education. Vocational programmes may be more accessible to the children of parents who have the same

vocation (e.g. medical programmes for the children of doctors, graphic design programmes for the children of graphic designers), partially because of the *numerus clausus* admissions criteria (e.g. “affinity with . . .”) and partially because of prior knowledge regarding the vocational programme and the associated admissions process.

Second, students from the lower strata are more likely to prefer subjects and disciplines that offer the best prospects for particular types of employment. The more concrete and secure a programme is, the more likely it is that students from the lower strata will choose them. Because of their social background, children from the higher strata know more about the less concrete and less secure subjects; with parental support, they also find it easier to take risks. This preference is also logical; students from lower strata have fewer resources at their disposal to support them during a protracted search for employment after graduation, as their parents are less able to help them, both financially and with regard to information. Most students from the higher strata have parents who are able to provide these types of assistance. This horizontal differentiation, thus, creates differences in the costs and benefits of different areas of study, depending on the social background, thereby increasing inequality in educational opportunity. In general, this means that students of equal cognitive capacity from lower strata still prefer concrete vocational programmes to vague, academically oriented programmes.

## **Transfer**

The influence of such differentiation in education (whether hidden or not) highlights the importance of retaining the ability to transfer to a higher stream or a different area of study or type of education to the reduction of inequalities in educational opportunity that are due to the social background. If an educational system offers more opportunities for upward transfer, students from lower strata have the opportunity to correct for earlier choices that were made because of their environment. Examples of increased opportunities for upward transfer include eliminating the necessity of repeating material, decreasing the distance between two successive educational programmes and the opportunity to return to school after gaining work experience.

In the Netherlands, the possibility of upward transfer within the various types of secondary education during the 1970s and 1980s gave students from the lower strata more chances to improve their educational opportunities. The possibility of upward transfer, however, was also used by students from the higher strata. Proportionately more of these students transferred upward than did students from the lower strata, although a larger percentage of students from the lower strata used these transfer opportunities (i.e. the “detour”) to achieve higher educational levels. In contrast, a larger percentage of students from the higher strata took the direct route to achieving higher educational levels. In terms of ultimate educational attainment, students from the lower strata used the detour more often than did students from the higher strata. In the 1990s, Dutch social-democrat ministers of Education have largely removed all of the opportunities for upward transfer. These opportunities have been eliminated

through lack of funding as well as through educational reform, particularly in the creation of a separate lowest level school type *preparatory secondary vocational education*.

These developments highlight an interesting difference between Dutch and German education. Whilst the German educational system contains almost no opportunities for upward transfer, there are still a few left in the Dutch system, most notably between *senior general secondary education* and *pre-university education* (the two highest school types). This could explain why there is greater inequality of educational opportunity in Germany than there is in the Netherlands, even though both countries have highly differentiated hierarchies of educational types.

There is, thus, no single dimension of differentiation between secondary and further education; there are several. The combination of these dimensions ultimately determines the precise extent of inequality in the educational opportunities of a given educational system. This is why unequal educational opportunities that are due to the social background are not only prominent in educational systems that involve a differentiated hierarchy of educational types (although the chance of such inequality is greater in this type of system). And this is why inequalities arising from the social background are not necessarily low in comprehensive schools.

According to an ancient Latin phrase, “We do not learn for school, but for life”. The labour market is an important sector in which these differences in knowledge and skills are “exchanged for” more or less attractive jobs, higher or lower incomes and so forth.

### ***Relationship Between Highest Educational Level and Labour Market Opportunities***

There is obviously a relationship between the final level of attained education and labour market opportunities. This relationship is not restricted to the chance of obtaining paid work and the length of time it takes to find a job; it is also associated with the quality of the work and the salary. There are several explanations for the relationship between education and the labour market. First, capabilities that are acquired in education (i.e. knowledge, skills and attitudes) are necessary in order to work successfully (human capital in the most restricted sense). Second, a diploma is an indicator of manifest productivity and ability to learn, both of which are necessary in order to acquire further, mostly company-related, capabilities during work (human capital in its broadest sense). Third, a diploma is an indicator of potential productivity and ability to learn, in comparison with those who have no diploma (credentialism). Although it is possible to show that these three reasons are all important in the relationship between education and the labour market, they cannot be used to ascribe specific values to various courses and occupations. This is problematic, as quality in education and labour market policies depends upon some measure of importance for each of these three explanations. It is even more difficult to measure the macro-level importance of the educational level of inhabitants of

OECD countries, not only for determining their macro-level productivity, but also for such issues as criminality and cultural participation. In fact, such a measurement is possible only on the basis of a considerable number of assumptions, as is all too common amongst neoclassical economists.<sup>31</sup>

The relation between attained educational level and achieved labour market position (as expressed in status, chance of unemployment, attractiveness of work, income and career possibilities) are roughly equal in most OECD countries. Slight national and inter-sectoral differences can be observed. Length and frequency of unemployment are very limited indicators of labour market position, because only a small part of the population ever becomes unemployed. Status and income are the most differentiated and comprehensive indicators in assessing the relationship between the attained educational level and labour market position.

### **Vocational Education**

Cross-national differences in the strength of this relationship seem to depend mainly on the existence of vocational education within these societies. These differences, therefore, also affect the total level of inequality in educational opportunity in a country. Successful completion of a vocational education programme is usually associated with a stronger position on the labour market. Because the more favourable cost–benefit balance makes vocational education more attractive to students from the lower strata (see section “Public and Hidden Differentiation”), well-organised vocational education can be an attractive path for upward mobility, and it can contribute to greater inter-generational mobility. This is especially true when vocational education is more than simply a lower differentiation within secondary education, but rather an independent pillar in secondary and tertiary education, offering sufficient opportunities for upward transfer (even during a vocational career, through on-the-job training). In societies without well-organised vocational education (e.g. English-speaking countries and France), this upward path does not exist, and talented children from the lower strata usually follow general educational programmes, despite the less favourable cost–benefit balance for these students.

In general, vocational education regulates access to the “vocational market segment”. This is a relatively protected sector of the labour market, in which vocational qualifications (learned during and guaranteed by the curriculum of vocational education) play the most important role in finding a job and in which general skills or company-specific knowledge are much less important. The advantage of a vocational market segment is that it is relatively easy to change employers, as long as there is sufficient demand for the specific vocational qualifications. This is also a

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<sup>31</sup> In fact, they are assuming either that the invisible hand of Adam Smith works well in the long term or that instrumental variables provide valid measurements. Although such strong assumptions do generate significant macro-level effects for education, they can also be explained in terms of the assumptions used.

labour market problem for graduates of vocational education, however, as they are vulnerable to changes in technologies and production processes.

If changes in their vocational market segments or other circumstances force these graduates to look for employment outside of their market segments, they are forced into the general labour market segment, in which general skills are more important. Because of the usual restrictions in available teaching and learning time, they have had less chance to acquire these during their vocational education; it is, therefore, more difficult for them to find good jobs outside of their vocational market segments. For this reason, vocational training may ultimately offer students from the lower strata only limited chances for upward mobility, and it may, thus, contribute less to upward intergenerational mobility than was expected at the transition from education to the labour market.

The second reason that well-organised vocational education may contribute less to equality of chances in society lies in the fact that not everyone completes the training successfully (sometimes also by a lack of suitable apprenticeship places). Students who do not complete their vocational programmes successfully do not acquire sufficient vocational qualifications to gain access to the vocational market segment. Because of the way in which vocational education is organised, they do not have sufficient general skills either to do well on the general labour market segment. In countries with well-organised vocational education, such dropouts are the most vulnerable of all school-leavers, especially in the general labour market segment. Because students from the lower strata are more likely to belong to this group, even well-organised vocational education can contribute to increases in unequal educational opportunities.

The discussion above clearly shows the double-edged character of education, which creates a dilemma in the organisation of vocational education. If vocational education is unable to guarantee that it will sufficiently provide the required vocational capabilities (e.g. because similar diplomas are awarded at different quality levels, making it difficult for employers to distinguish amongst them), the strengthened position of vocational education graduates will disappear along with the opportunity for upward mobility.

If vocational education were to focus more on general capabilities (based on the reasoning that they are also important in the vocation and are required on the labour market), the stronger labour market position of vocational education graduates would also disappear, as it would no longer offer a clear advantage over general education. The opportunity for students from the lower strata to use vocational education as a ladder to climb socially would be reduced as well, even though the demand for specific vocational capabilities would still exist, despite technological changes in the production process.<sup>32</sup> Foreign workers, who do have these specific vocational capabilities, would then have better chances on the labour market of an OECD country (“the Polish plumber in France”), and often at competitive prices,

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<sup>32</sup> The significance and extent of current economic and technological changes are often exaggerated in quasi-sociological policy analyses, whilst those of the past are underestimated.

even as more generally educated students who have followed vocational training have more difficulty finding work because they no longer have the perhaps “traditional” but yet necessary vocational capabilities. The key is, therefore, for vocational education to achieve a good balance between occupation-specific and more general training, as well as between regulating access to the vocational market and considering differences in students’ competencies. Only when this balance has been found and maintained, well-organised vocational education can contribute to reducing the existence of unequal educational opportunities and increasing openness within society.

### Market Sectors

The relationship between educational and labour market position also varies between labour market segments. As already outlined, the successful completion of the relevant vocational training<sup>33</sup> is a necessary condition in a vocational market segment. Vocation-oriented knowledge and skills are much more important with regard to entry and selection in this market sector than the social background is. Attained educational level and area of study remain important throughout the career in the vocational sector. Although education is not necessary for the general labour market segment, employers use attained educational level and area of study as indicators of desirable qualities (e.g. tidiness, diligence, intelligence and obedience), along with gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, employment history and other characteristics. Although the social background also plays a minor role in selection in the general labour market segment, it is irrelevant for entry. Attained educational level is of moderate significance on the general employment market, but it still plays a role when changing jobs.

In the corporate sector,<sup>34</sup> education is used primarily as an indicator of “trainability” within the company and the ability to fit into internal career schemes. Internal and external differentiation within education (whether hidden or not) also play a role in the selection process, in addition to attained educational level, as well as social background. In the corporate sector education functions primarily as a screening device to identify the most trainable candidates. Estimated capacities based on education, as well as social background are more important for entry into

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<sup>33</sup> An educational programme need not be called a vocational training course in order to provide access to a specific vocational market (as with law programmes and the legal profession).

<sup>34</sup> Corporate market sectors are mainly found in the larger companies, where selected employees who are essential to the company receive permanent employment contract with primary and secondary employment conditions that exceed those that are available on the general market. At the same time, the transfer costs are increased for these employees, through legal restrictions and through company-specific qualifications, which are of less value outside the company. It is, therefore, possible for three market sectors to exist alongside one another within a large company. Classic examples of companies with a corporate market sectors in the Netherlands include Shell and Unilever. Corporate market sectors also exist in the government (e.g. the diplomatic service). Many smaller companies and institutions may also have corporate market sectors in order to be able to cope with strong fluctuations in production.

this labour market segment than knowledge and skills. Companies assess these estimated capacities by means of “entry-level jobs” (e.g. traineeships), most of which are below the normal level. Success in entry-level jobs is followed by a career or series of jobs within the company, in which educational level plays a progressively smaller role.

The first job after completing education is very important for a student’s future career, but it is not the only determining factor. Educational level and area of study also influence further opportunities on the labour market, although their direct effect does decrease whilst the effect of the last job increases, except on the general labour market segment. This does not mean that education is less important in later employment, but that previous jobs are superior to education as an indicator of individual productivity, and serve as a stepping stone to the current job (especially on the corporate employment market). During (and especially at the beginning of) a career, there are still advantages to having been born in a higher stratum. These advantages, which are not derived from either capacity or education, can be explained in terms of greater social capital. This is manifested in access to more information regarding possible employment and the opportunity to influence decision makers, the increased parental resources that allow a longer search for suitable employment and the less favourable cost–benefit balance of accepting employment at a lower level than that of the parents (social decline).

### ***Relationship Between Inequality in Education and in Other Social Sectors***

In addition to the relationship between educational level and opportunities on the labour market, there are clear relationships between educational level and inequality in other social sectors as well. In this section, I discuss four sectors that are clearly related to educational level and are very relevant in the creation and development of unequal educational opportunities: the marriage market, divorce, migration and cultural participation.

#### **Partners**

Educational homogamy refers to the phenomenon that partners with similar levels of schooling have a much greater chance of marrying one another than do partners who do not. The greater the difference in schooling level, the more unlikely it is that partners will marry. In this context, it is not important whether partners marry formally or live together, as educational homogamy is roughly the same in both cases. Educational homogamy already existed prior to the rapid increase in the educational level of women during the twentieth century, but it was less obvious because of the large numbers of lowly educated women (who, nonetheless, varied widely in intelligence). Following the rapid increase in the educational level of women, educational homogamy became much more obvious, partially because their educational level

now corresponded more with their capability, as had traditionally been the case for men. Educational homogamy remained high and stable, with slight increases during the end of the twentieth century.

The rapid increase in the educational level of women has masked another phenomenon: “the female marrying up”. Marrying up means that, in cases of unequal educational levels between partners, the woman’s level is more likely to be lower than the man’s than vice versa. A similar pattern exists with height, age, nobility status and similar factors.<sup>35</sup> One of the consequences of this tendency to marry up is that very highly educated (or tall, old or titled) women are less likely to find partners than highly educated men are. On the other hand, very lowly educated (or short, young, etc.) men are less likely to find a partner than lowly educated women are.

There are two important reasons for educational homogamy.<sup>36</sup> First, the chance of a stable relationship developing is greater if both partners have relatively similar characteristics, as their preferences are more compatible. Second, the circumstances in which partners meet one another (e.g. circles of family and acquaintances, educational institutions, employment organisations, recreational time) are relatively homogenous with regard to social (and, therefore, educational) strata, increasing the likelihood that people with equal schooling will meet one another.

The importance of educational homogamy is primarily that partners help one another and that the amount of mutual support depends in part upon the amount of resources that individual partners have at their disposal. This mutual support, which is known as the “partner effect”, is, therefore, an addition to the individual characteristics of the partners. Partners with a high level of education have a more powerful partner effect and are, therefore, able to offer one another more mutual support. Examples include finding good employment for the other partner, seeking good schools for their children, overcoming unavoidable problems in the lives of both partners (e.g. illness, economic setbacks).

The strength of the partner effect obviously does not depend only upon the educational level of both partners, but on their dedication to the relationship as well. Married couples tend to invest more in their relationships than do couples who are living together. Formal marriage is experienced as a stronger commitment than a partnership contract. Educational homogamy, therefore, increases intragenerational inequality in society, and it, therefore, leads indirectly to unequal educational opportunities for their children.

A second, more direct, way in which educational homogamy contributes to unequal educational opportunities involves the influence of the educational level of parents on the educational opportunities of children. In many cases, children who have highly educated mothers also have highly educated fathers, and children who have lowly educated fathers also have lowly educated mothers. The combination

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<sup>35</sup> It is possible that the tendency of women to “marrying up” has a biological component, which originated during human evolution.

<sup>36</sup> I refer here to the likelihood of educational homogamy; the exception to the rule is interesting, but does not refute the existence of educational homogamy.

of lowly and highly educated parents does not occur very often. This means that compensation of the low educational level of one parent by the high level of the other also occurs only infrequently. The Matthew principle is applicable in this context, “Everyone who has will be given more. He will have more than enough. And what about anyone who doesn’t have? Even what he has will be taken away from him”. In these two ways, educational homogamy makes a powerful contribution to unequal educational opportunities; the contribution of educational homogamy is actually much greater than is that of teaching conditions in schools.

## **Divorce**

The end of a relationship between parents, whether or not they were married, has a negative influence on children, both on their educational opportunities and other welfare aspects (e.g. illness, mental stability and chance of criminality).<sup>37</sup> The divorce itself is not the only cause; part of the problem lies in the pre-divorce characteristics of the parents and their children (e.g. personality, ability to communicate and cooperate) and in the severity of the conflicts prior to the divorce. From the perspective of the children, however, divorce is often not the end of conflicts between parents; legal consequences often intensify them. Divorce also contributes to a decrease in educational opportunities for the children involved. This occurs because, as in the period following divorce, parents pay less attention to the education of their children (they are moving, starting again, forming new relationships) and because their authority over their children has been reduced (the parents have shown that they are unable to solve their own problems).

Because of these negative effects, divorce is not always the best solution to parental conflicts, particularly not from the perspective of and in the interests of the children. In societies in which divorce is rare, parents with plenty of resources (including education) are the most likely to divorce. In societies in which the process of ending of cohabitation relationships has become more common and democratic, parents with few resources (including education) are the most likely to divorce; as they have less help in keeping their relationship together during the difficult times that inevitably occur in every relationship. Moreover, such difficult times also occur more often amongst lower-stratum couples because of the greater economic and cognitive vulnerability that they experience. Because of the far-reaching democratisation of divorce in many OECD countries, divorce now contributes to the increase in unequal educational opportunities amongst children from both higher and lower strata.

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<sup>37</sup> The end of the relationship between a child’s parents has effects that extend beyond the short or medium term. Parental divorce doubles the chance that their children will also divorce, even controlling for differences in the age at which the children of divorced parents begin their first relationships and have their first children (two other factors that increase the likelihood of divorce).

## Migration

Although migration from one region or continent to another is a characteristic of the human race, immigration in Europe has taken on a new dimension since the Second World War because of three developments. First, migration has increased in response to the growing interdependence between societies (European Union, globalisation), because of the increase in both worldwide mass media and cheap transport over longer distances. This means that an increasing number of European countries are confronted with immigration even though they are not prepared for it (e.g. with regard to their social security systems), in contrast to such traditional immigration countries as Australia, Canada and the United States. Second, the availability of mass media and transport has made the break between migrants and their countries of origin less absolute. This has diminished the necessity of integrating into the new society, both because of the option of returning (whether real or not) and the greater opportunities that immigrants have for creating their own social and cultural niche in the new society (including finding marriage partners from their lands of origin). Third, the global economic differences between poorer and richer societies have created streams of migration that can no longer be sufficiently held in check, due to the growing interdependence between poor and rich countries, cheap mass transport and the demand for cheap labour in rich countries.

Because of these three developments, immigration is becoming increasingly intertwined with existing inequality in European societies, and it is giving it a tint that is both European and ethnic. Most immigration to European countries consists of the migration of EU citizens between EU member states; such migration is usually due to the internationalisation of the upper segments of the labour market (vocational and corporate labour market segments) and an increase in transnational marriage. Although the European aspect of migration primarily involves the influx of highly educated immigrants (usually from other EU member states), the emergence of a cosmopolitan elite in the European countries is involved as well.

This development has increased the availability of internationally oriented education (e.g. English-language schools in non-English speaking countries, the International Baccalaureate, Erasmus exchange programmes, international courses in tertiary education). It has also generated new forms of differentiation within the national educational systems, as students and/or their parents need sufficient financial and cultural capital to be able to make use of this internationally oriented education, particularly because selection sometimes involves competition with students from other European countries. Because of their lack of these types of capital, students from the lower strata have fewer opportunities to take part in this internationally oriented education. The internationalisation of parts of European education systems can increase the educational inequality within European countries, ultimately increasing the social distance between different strata within society as well.

The ethnic aspect of immigration largely involves the influx of less educated immigrants from Africa, Asia and Latin America. Although a major part of the

educational disadvantage of the children of immigrants from these parts of the world can be attributed to the low level of their parents' educational attainment, occupations and the amount of segregation in their schools and neighbourhoods, these factors do not explain the entire disadvantage. Furthermore, many second-generation immigrant students (i.e. those whose parents were born in Africa, Asia or Latin America, but who were born and raised in the country of destination) still have an educational disadvantage that cannot be explained by individual characteristics. Roughly speaking, second-generation immigrant students from East and Central Asia no longer have an educational disadvantage; in fact, they are more likely to have pulled ahead.

There is no obvious explanation for the magnitude of differences between migrant students from various parts of the world. Possible explanations include the migration history (e.g. negatively selected migrant workers as compared to positively selected immigrants from former colonies; political refugees as compared to economic refugees), the social and cultural distance between the country of origin and the destination country, and the culture and religion of the country of origin. Differences in the extent of discrimination against various immigrant groups apparently offer a less likely explanation. If this explanation were plausible, the Chinese would be amongst the immigrant groups that experienced the least discrimination in European society, which seems not very plausible. The cultural and religiously based reaction to actual discrimination (e.g. withdrawal and discouragement as compared to working harder and fighting back) is another possible explanation. The case of Chinese immigrants also suggests that differences in the extent of integration and assimilation are less likely to offer an explanation; Chinese immigrants are not included amongst the most integrated and assimilated immigrants in European society. Nonetheless, it is possible that certain religions help to determine the economic success of migrant followers in capitalist societies. For example, the values that are incorporated in a religion may encourage the success of its adherents. In this regard, Islamic values (e.g. strong sense of honour, subordinate position of women) could hinder success, whilst those of Confucianism (e.g. strong family ties, hard work) could promote success.<sup>38</sup>

The extent of the educational disadvantage experienced by ethnic immigrants from the same country of origin, but living in different countries in Europe apparently varies as well. Individual characteristics alone cannot explain this variation. In other words, European societies and their educational systems can differ in the extent of educational disadvantage that is experienced by the groups of the same ethnic origin. The educational disadvantage of ethnic immigrant students may have a different explanation than does that of the native lower strata. In addition,

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<sup>38</sup> That potential of religion to hinder economic success in capitalist societies is not necessarily specific to Islam. Until the twentieth century, Catholicism was also less compatible with capitalism than were protestant denominations.

liberal welfare regimes (as in the United Kingdom) appear to provide better conditions for reducing the educational disadvantage of immigrant students than do Mediterranean<sup>39</sup> or conservative<sup>40</sup> welfare regimes.

## Culture

Education increases the likelihood of participating in the more valued aspects of a society's culture, whether classic (e.g. visits to museums and concerts, reading books and newspapers) or "modern" (e.g. pop concerts, internet access, ability to follow the foreign media). Participation increases the cultural capital of those involved, as well as that of partners and children (through joint participation and transfer of experience). The access that education provides to a higher and wider culture, therefore, indirectly contributes to an increase in unequal educational opportunities.

## Are Inequalities in Educational Outcomes Caused by Features of Educational Systems?

This overview of the various causes of unequal educational outcomes gives two answers to the main question of this book: Are meso- and macro-characteristics of educational systems the causes of educational inequality? On the one hand, the answer is negative: at maximum they are influencing unequal educational outcomes, but they are not at the root of inequality of education. Individual characteristics of pupils and parents are far more influential than any of the meso- or macro-features. On the other hand, the answer is positive: unequal educational opportunities get only their form within these features and these inequalities can vary by the educational system in which it develops. Perhaps the seemingly contradiction between individual factors or educational systems as causes of educational inequality is perhaps as fruitless as those between nature and nurture. It become now more and more that these kind of deterministic contradictions do not exist in human and societal nature. There do not exist pre-given features of individuals and their contexts, which determine outcomes. Individual potentials and constrains and opportunities stemming from the surrounding contexts are interacting with each other in a constant process of adaption and change. It is this constant process that also gives concrete forms to the individual potentials and to the institutions of the contexts. With the other, neither individual characteristics nor contexts would exist. This does not mean that the question about the importance of education is irrelevant. It is no longer a philosophical question of a-priories (individual or context), but a scientific question of how much and where and when. Cross-national analysis can be helpful to measure these much, where and when's. This book is hopefully a step in the good direction.

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<sup>39</sup> Examples include Italy, Portugal or Spain.

<sup>40</sup> Examples include Germany, France and (in part) the Netherlands.

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