



“Summary of article by Michael Hout, Adrian E. Raftery, and Eleanor O. Bell: Making the Grade: Educational Stratification in the United States, 1925-1989” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 5: The Political Economy of Inequality. Island Press: Washington DC, 2000. pp. 231-234

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## **“Summary of article by Michael Hout, Adrian E. Raftery, and Eleanor O. Bell: Making the Grade: Educational Stratification in the United States, 1925-1989”**

Education and social stratification are closely linked, but the pattern of the relationship differs from one society and time period to another. In the United States, education is presumed to be integral to the American Dream of upward mobility. Secondary and higher education have expanded much faster than the school-age population, creating more equality in educational attainment by many measures. Yet it is widely believed that educational stratification remains important, perhaps in new forms that escape detection in standard analyses.

The authors of this essay introduce, and apply to U.S. data, a framework that they call "maximally maintained inequality," first developed in their studies of educational stratification in Ireland and Britain. This framework focuses attention on the long-term changes in the patterns of inequality in education, highlighting trends that do not show up in static analyses of experience at a single point time.

The underlying idea is that existing patterns of inequality will tend to be preserved, regardless of whether educational opportunities are static or expanding. In the former case, the status quo in education will be maintained; in the latter case, higher-status groups will gain preferential access to new levels of education, and lower-status groups will follow only after everyone above them has had the opportunity to move up. This pattern might emerge from the rational choices of parents and students, if privileged groups are primarily interested in maximizing their own families' education, not in the derivative goal of maintaining class differentials.

### **Trends in American Education**

Compared to other developed countries, education in the United States is quite decentralized, with a minimal federal role; most policy decisions are made at the local or state level. Public school districts are typically dependent on local funding sources which vary widely from one community to the next. About 10% of primary and secondary school students attend private schools; the largest subgroup are those operated by the Catholic Church. Higher education is even more varied, spanning the range from two-year community colleges, technical and trade schools, to liberal arts colleges and major universities. Despite this institutional diversity, education is compulsory from the ages of 6 to 16, and there are well-established patterns of tracking or ability grouping that establish an educational hierarchy in most schools.

Enrollments increased rapidly in the first half of the twentieth century. Half the male population aged 5 to 19 was in school in 1900; by 1970 the figure had risen to 90%. Female enrollments rose at a similar rate. Thus average levels of schooling were rising rapidly as well. The authors' analysis of levels of schooling focuses on transition rates: the probability of finishing a stage of education (primary, secondary, or higher) once it has been started, and the probability of entering the next stage once a lower stage has been completed. They use data on the education of a large sample of working adults, over age 25, collected in several years from 1972 to 1989. As in their studies of Ireland and Britain, they distinguish the experience of successive birth cohorts in order to study changes over time. The U.S. data includes seven cohorts, those born before 1905, and in each decade from 1905-14 through 1955-64 -- that is, from the end of the baby boom back through their grandparents.

Studies of educational mobility have often relied on data for men only. This study includes data on women as well as men, generally finding that pronounced gender differences in the older cohorts (at any level of social status, men used to go farther in school) have been vanishing in the younger groups. In the youngest cohort, born in 1955-64, men are more likely to have dropped out of high school (that cohort's gender differences are much smaller for other transitions), and women averaged a quarter of a year more education than men.

A simple analysis of the data suggests that, as average educational levels have risen, the apparent effects of social origins have declined. Influences such as mother's education, father's occupational prestige, and farm vs. non-farm origins have a much smaller effect on educational attainment in the most recent cohorts; in contrast, the effect of father's education does not show a clear trend over time. However, a subtler analysis is required to test the authors' hypothesis.

### **Growth and Inequality: Analysis of Transition Rates**

As more and more students advanced to higher educational levels, the earliest transitions became saturated: across the seven cohorts in the study, the proportion completing primary education grew from 68% to 98%, while the probability of starting secondary education after finishing the primary grades grew in tandem from 72% to 99%. The upgrading of students' origins may have contributed to this change: years of school completed by the average worker's mother rose from 7.7 in the oldest cohort to 12.0 in the youngest.

The "maximally maintained inequality" hypothesis says, roughly speaking, that socioeconomic groups will pass through successive educational transitions in order of their social status. A careful formulation of this model turns out to imply that the influence of socioeconomic background on education is variable over time. When the probability for the whole society of any one transition is close to zero, or close to 100%, then the measured influence of social class and family background on that transition will be minimal. At intermediate transition levels, in theory reaching a peak at 50% transition probability, the measured influence of background should be much greater. Over a long enough interval of time, the influence of any given background variable on a particular transition should therefore rise as the transition becomes moderately common, and then fall again as the transition becomes nearly universal.

The principal empirical result of the study, a regression analysis that estimates the cohort-by-cohort effect of measures of social background on each educational transition, is consistent with the expected pattern in many but not all cases. Other factors have also shaped educational mobility, including the Depression-era decline in educational attainment, and the pronounced drop in high school completion rates for those from low-status backgrounds in the latest cohort (who were in high school in the 1970s).

The latter trend is evidence of an emerging educational underclass: “For men whose parents did not attend secondary school (8% of the 1955-1964 cohort) [high school] graduation rates are actually below the rates for men from comparable backgrounds born earlier in the century.” [43] High school graduation rates also dropped for low-status women, though not as sharply as for men. The rise in high school drop outs could represent educational retrenchment and increased competition for resources, but it seems more likely to be a result of growing urban disorganization. (It is not a reflection of the rise of single-parent families, in this study at least, because the sample is restricted to people who know both of their parents’ education – ruling out most of those raised by a single parent.)

## **Conclusion**

The expansion of secondary schools and institutions of higher learning in the United States throughout most of the 20th century narrowed the gaps between the educational achievements of Americans from different social origins. Nonetheless, the underlying structure of inequality was to a significant extent preserved, in the manner described by the “maximally maintained inequality” hypothesis. Expanding educational resources meant that increasing numbers of students from less-advantaged backgrounds could be accommodated at higher levels of education without directly competing for resources with more advantaged students -- who remained at the head of the queue even as everyone moved up. Gender inequality in education, in contrast, appears to have declined markedly; if anything, women are now slightly ahead by some measures.

One surprising result, not predicted by the authors’ theoretical framework, was the emergence of an educational underclass, most dramatically among men, but affecting women too. Failure to complete high school was transmitted from one generation to the next, more strongly than in the past, even in the face of expanding educational opportunities.