Can Education Be Equalized? The Swedish Case in Comparative Perspective
edited by Robert Erikson and Jan O. Jonsson

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Equalizing educational opportunities has been a long-standing political concern in Sweden. As far back as the late 19th century, radicals demanded that the existing six-year comprehensive school should be a common school for children of all social origins. In the late 1920s an important step was taken towards the realization of this goal, but a truly comprehensive elementary school – comprising the first nine school years – was not introduced until the 1960s. During this entire period, a number of other educational and social reforms were undertaken in order to equalize life-chances between social classes. The expansion and alteration of the Swedish school system, as well as the introduction of far-reaching welfare state policies, were made possible by the enormous economic growth during this century.

It was a standard assumption that the general improvement of living conditions, which accelerated during the 1950s and 1960s, and the implementation of school reforms had led to a considerable reduction in the impact of social background on educational attainment. This assumption was questioned, however; at the beginning of the 1970s, and from the 1980s onwards the expectation was rather that social selection in schools was increasing. The political debate in Sweden about inequalities in educational attainment was fairly speculative during this period, characterized by a lack of firm empirical knowledge about what changes actually had occurred.

Given this unclear state of knowledge, the Swedish government commissioned us in the summer of 1991 to undertake a study of how social origin affects transitions to higher education. We were to describe how social inequality of educational opportunity had changed since World War II and give a reliable and detailed account of the present situation. Furthermore, if, as expected, we found differences in educational attainment between social classes, we were as far as was possible to explain why these differences arose. Of special interest was whether the series of reforms of Swedish schools and universities had had the intended effect of reducing social inequality in educational outcomes. The results of our efforts to satisfy these demands were
reported in two volumes, *Ursprung och utbildning* (Fritzes) and *Soreringen i skolan* (Carlssons). This volume is the third to arise from the work of the Governmental Commission.

**Sweden in a Comparative Perspective**

The Commission's main task was to analyse the situation in Sweden. It is well known, however, that the best way to acquire knowledge about one case is to compare it to other ones. Therefore, right from the start, our aim was a comparative approach.

Comparative research may be focused in various ways. One approach is to concentrate interest on the international scene – on patterns of similarities and differences between nations. The ultimate purpose is to try to account for some types of variation between nations by the help of other macro-sociological characteristics. In another approach, interest is concentrated on a single country. Here we want to know to what extent conditions and developments in this country are unique or commonplace within, say, the industrial world. Such an approach will among other things tell us whether we, in an attempt to explain some aspect of this country's development, should look for general characteristics of industrial societies or for specific national features. As the title of this book indicates, our idea in the Commission was to apply the second angle – to put Sweden in a comparative perspective – though some of the studies reported below also make possible inferences about mechanisms behind inequality of educational opportunity that are common to several nations.

For the purpose of comparing educational inequality in Sweden with that prevailing in other nations, we approached the contributors to this book. They were encouraged to conduct comparative analyses focusing on Sweden, or to carry out analyses which had a bearing on the question of educational inequalities in general. The authors were not given any strict guidelines for their analyses, but common problems of data, methods, and interpretation of preliminary results were discussed at a seminar in Gällivare, Sweden, in the summer of 1992.

**This Book**

The book begins with a discussion of class inequality in educational attainment, attempting to outline what factors in general could explain change over time and variation between nations. This introductory chapter summarizes the results of the book, but draws on other studies in the field, as well. It also outlines strategies for reducing educational inequality.

The next three chapters deal with the Swedish situation. Chapter 1 gives basic information about the Swedish educational system, and summarizes some of the more important findings of the Commission's work, especially concerning the change over time of educational inequality in Sweden. In Chapter 2, Robert Erikson analyses what factors have influenced variation in the effect of class origin on educational outcomes in Sweden during the last sixty years. Focus is on societal changes – such as economic growth, income dispersion, and unemployment rates – and on educational reforms. Jan O. Jonsson then, in Chapter 3, extends the perspective by studying changes over time in the returns to education, and in the impact of social class origin on what credentials a person achieves, and on the social position he or she reaches.

In Chapter 4, Walter Müller uses a unique data base (CASMIN) for studying the pattern and level of class-based educational inequality in Sweden in a comparative perspective. The comparison is with eight industrialized European nations. Chapter 5, by Jan O. Jonsson, Colin Mills and Walter Müller, contains a comparative study of changes in class and sex inequality in educational attainment in Sweden, England, and Germany, using recent data from each country. In Chapter 6, Michael Hout and Daniel P. Dohrn conduct a comparative study of the importance of class origin on educational outcomes in Sweden and the U.S.A. Since they have been able to use data that are similarly coded, this is one of the few studies in social stratification in which the U.S. experience can be related to that of a European nation. Hout and Dohrn discuss whether the path taken by the U.S.A., characterized by educational expansion, leads to a level of inequality in educational attainment that is different from, or perhaps similar to that of Sweden, where the path towards educational equality is characterized by equalizing living conditions in society generally.

Chapter 7 accomplishes two things. Firstly, Yossi Shavit and Hans-Peter Blossfeld summarize the results from the large comparative study on trends in educational inequality, putting Sweden into perspective against twelve other industrial countries, European and American, as well as Asian. Secondly, they initiate a discussion of whether class equalization and gender equalization are competing processes, so that, in most nations, the educational expansion has been utilized primarily by middle class daughters, thus hampering social class equalization.

In Chapter 8, finally, John H. Goldthorpe widens the perspective on the question of educational inequalities by analyzing the concept of "merit", and discussing whether education should be considered a legitimate principle for distributing rewards. His conclusions are highly relevant for students of social stratification, suggesting, among other
things, that we should not neglect to scrutinize what stratifying mechanisms are at work just because existing theories and data provide us with prefabricated answers and standard variables.

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Stockholm in October 1995,

Robert Erikson and Jan O. Jonsson

Introduction

Explaining Class Inequality in Education: The Swedish Test Case*

Robert Erikson and Jan O. Jonsson

Swedish Exceptionalism?

In studies of social policy, inequality of living conditions, and social stratification, Sweden is often put forward as an exceptional case among Western nations. Welfare state provisions are more comprehensive than in most other countries; they are principally based on universal social policies, and the degree of coverage of social benefits is high (Korpi 1983; Esping-Andersen 1990). A traditionally strong labour movement has lead to strongly influential left-wing policies – the Swedish Social-Democrats have been in office for most of the post-war period – and powerful trade unions (Korpi 1983). This has resulted in egalitarian reforms and other policies that could be assumed at least partly to have caused the substantial reduction of inequalities in income and other aspects of the level of living, and to have been behind the comparatively low unemployment rates prevailing in Sweden from World War II up to the early 1990s.1

* We are grateful for the comments and advice on this chapter from Richard Breen, John Goldthorpe, Anthony Heath, Colin Mills, Walter Müller, and Yossi Shavit.

1. For a description of changes in the level of living in Sweden, see Erikson and Åberg (1987) and Vogel et al. (1988); for evidence of decreasing income differences in Sweden, see e.g. Spånt (1979) and Åberg, Selén and Tham (1987); for an analysis of the mechanisms behind income equalization, see Hibbs (1991); and for comparative studies of income inequality, see e.g. Fritzell (1993), and Gottschalk and Smeeding (1995).
With a low income dispersion and generous welfare policies, Sweden is no doubt one of the more egalitarian Western societies; perhaps even the most egalitarian. But there is also another reason to discuss a possible Swedish exceptionalism. In Sweden, probably more than in most other Western countries, school reforms have been carried out with the explicit aim of reducing social inequalities in educational attainment. The pursuit of these reforms was motivated by four reasons, emphasized to varying degrees at different times.

(i) Social selection in schools leads to reduced societal efficiency since it means a waste of talent. Such arguments were already being put forward at the end of the 19th century by those who wanted to improve conditions in the compulsory school.

(ii) The fact that children from the lower classes are given less opportunity to develop their intellectual capacities must be regarded as a major injustice. Liberals and social democrats attacked the school of the early 20th century from this perspective and several educational reforms have been motivated by this argument.

(iii) Social discord may result from children from different social classes going to different schools. A "deteriorous sense of class" could, according to some, follow. They also claimed that children who would be expected to cooperate in their later working lives, should not start by being separated into different schools.

(iv) Social inequality in educational outcomes means that the leading elite will not be representative of society as a whole. If a larger proportion of this elite had working class backgrounds, conditions of life in these classes would be better understood, class antagonism reduced and political democracy strengthened.

The educational reforms accomplished in order to come to grips with these problems are described in Chapter 1. Suffice it to say here that in the decades before World War II, the fairly small private school sector was "crowded out", and from around 1950 onwards, the Swedish educational system was fundamentally transformed. It changed from a traditional European one – characterized by early selection, parallel school forms, and a small, exclusive tertiary sector – to a system resembling the American one, with a non-selective comprehensive school based on mixed ability classes, and mass education at secondary level. Transition to higher education was facilitated partly by the expansion of adult education, partly by the introduction of a comprehensive study loan system, and also by earlier educational "dead ends" being opened up, and making connections to tertiary schooling possible (though still rarely exploited).

The route taken by Sweden was not copied from the U.S.A., however. A strong emphasis on vocational education (with a general con-

tent, and not firm or branch specific as in Germany) characterizes the reformed school system, one largely intentional consequence being the diversion of students away from academic studies (Murray 1988). This diversion policy, in combination with decreasing returns to higher education and the introduction of numero clausus at universities, arrested the dramatic expansion of tertiary education in the early 1970s. Though participation rates resumed a high level in the 1980s, Sweden still today has, in an international perspective, a high proportion of students pursuing secondary education up until age 18, but a fairly medium sized tertiary sector (OECD 1995).

The relatively low level of inequality of conditions, in combination with far-reaching educational reforms, should, one might assume, promote equality of opportunity in Sweden. Ascriptive features (such as the economic situation or social status of the family of origin) should be less pervasive in a society in which resources are relatively evenly distributed between social classes, and in which traditional barriers in the school system have been removed. The transmission of resources across generations should arguably be less influential in determining the future life-chances of children, resulting in a comparatively "open" society, with high and increasing social mobility (cf. Goldthorpe 1980/87).

Empirical studies seem to some extent to verify this. Unlike most other comparable nations, relative social mobility – or, "social fluidity" – has increased in Sweden (Erikson 1983; Jonsson and Mills 1993a), and the degree of "social inheritance" is relatively low (Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992). In another perspective, however, it is perhaps more striking how similar nations are with respect to social fluidity. The pattern of inequality is very much the same in Sweden as, in other nations, and even if the degree is somewhat lower, the differences are not particularly great. Our impression is that Sweden deviates less from other nations when it comes to inequality of social opportunity than in terms of inequality of living conditions. This suggests that the mechanisms behind inequality of opportunity are highly resistant to change.

It is in this perspective we would like to see the studies of educational inequalities carried out in this book.2 Arguably, Sweden is somewhat of a deviant case with regard to inequality of conditions, the power of

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2. We shall use the terms "educational inequality" and "class/social inequality in educational attainment/outcomes" interchangeably in this chapter, though "educational inequality" of course could be defined with reference to sex, ethnicity, etc. Our usage of the term is also in conflict with some scholars' definition of educational inequality as dispersion in education, that is, individual-level differences in educational attainment (e.g., Jencks et al. 1972).
the working class, and educational reform. Educational attainment, as the prime channel for social mobility as well as for social reproduction, is central to the life-chances of young people. If differences in the level of living and favourable institutional conditions are central to explaining educational inequality, then we would expect to find equalization trends in Sweden that are more impressive than for other nations, and we would also find that the level of inequality of educational opportunity is lower. If, however, more subtle social differences — in cultural resources or in aspirations, for example — and/or the rank order of classes in terms of living conditions are most important, we would not expect the differences between Sweden and other industrial societies to be great, since many essential features of the class structure seem to be much the same.

Class Equalization in Educational Outcomes — A Swedish Peculiarity?

In the light of the results presented below, what can we conclude about the level and pattern of educational inequality in Sweden, and the changes therein? Firstly, it seems now to be firmly established that Sweden has experienced an equalization during this century, both for men and women. The analyses in Chapter 1 (by Erikson and Jonsson), based on a large sample, show convincingly that class inequalities have decreased, thus confirming results of previous studies on other and/or smaller data sets (Jonsson 1987, 1993; Jonsson and Mills 1993c; cf. Chapter 5 and 6 in this volume).

In Chapter 1, we are in a position to be able to detect more exactly when this equalization took place: the “golden era” seems approximately to have been between 1930 and 1970 — for the last 25 years the association between social origin and educational attainment has been about the same for the transition to tertiary education, but may have decreased somewhat at earlier transition points. The equalization at higher levels is to a large extent attributable to similar trends at lower levels, however. There is no support for the hypothesis that the association between class background and transition to university has weakened among those who gained an upper secondary level diploma (Jonsson and Mills 1993c).

So, just how exceptional is the equalization we find for Sweden? In a large comparative project carried out by a team of researchers under the leadership of Shavit and Blossfeld (1993), and summarized by them in Chapter 7, Sweden and Holland stand out as the only two nations which have experienced a trend towards lessening class inequality in educational attainment. In England, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland, the U.S.A., Japan, Taiwan, and Israel no such trends were found. Since these studies all employed the same statistical methods — OLS regressions on years of education, and logit models of similar transitions in the national school systems — the results are more comparable than is normally the case. Two problems still remain, however. Firstly, definitions of social origin differ from country to country (some use status or prestige scales, some social class schemes). Secondly, as pointed out by De Graaf and Ganzeboom (1993) in their analysis on Holland, the fact that sample sizes differ may cause problems, since year to year trends could be difficult to detect, or at least to prove statistically significant, in small surveys.

Obviously, then, it would be premature to conclude that Sweden and Holland are the only nations studied in which an equalization of educational opportunity has in fact occurred. There is also another important reason for caution: for some nations the results are ambiguous. For Holland, for example, Vrooman and Dronkers (1986) do not find an equalization. For Hungary, Sinkus and Andorka (1982) report an equalization, while Szelenyi and Aschaffenburg (1993) conclude that there has been no change. The results in Chapter 5 of this volume show a clear equalization for Germany, challenging Blossfeld’s (1993) conclusion of no change. Since Müller and Hein (1994) and Henz and Maas (in press) also find an equalization for Germany, there is now fairly convincing evidence that an equalization of class inequality in educational attainment has in fact taken place there.

England is a special case. The “standard” result that there has been no equalization (see Heath and Clifford 1990) is largely supported by the results in Chapter 5 by Jonsson, Mills and Müller. In an attempt to analyze comparable educational decisions about school continuation in England and Sweden, however, Jonsson and Mills (1993c) find a clear trend towards equalization in England which actually matches that of Sweden. As discussed in Chapter 5, these divergent results probably stem from different conceptualizations of “educational attain-

3. Their study is not without problems, as discussed by De Graaf and Ganzeboom (1993). However, the data set De Graaf and Ganzeboom use is a combination of a number of quite different small surveys (carried out by different agencies, with different codings, response errors, etc.), which make their analyses problematic as well.

4. As discussed in Chapter 5, differences in the measures of social origin, as well as the varying size of the data-sets used, probably explain why there is a discrepancy between results for Germany.
ment". The relatively strong emphasis on ability and performance in the English school system presumably promotes stability in educational inequalities when these are defined as credentials achieved through public examinations, rather than as educational transitions made. This is because social class differences in ability may be assumed to change less over time than the corresponding differences in school continuation decisions.

Another important matter is whether equalization has taken place through generally diminishing relative differences between social classes, or whether it is a result of changing educational attainment in some particular social category. Some national studies have reported a relative improvement of the educational opportunities of farmer's children. As shown in Chapter 1 in this volume, in Sweden all previously disadvantaged classes have experienced a relative increase in educational attainment. This suggests that the equalization is not merely due to an improvement of some earlier "educationally marginalized" group in the population, and hence we should look for general mechanisms behind the trend.

LESS CLASS INEQUALITY IN EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT IN SWEDEN?

As mentioned earlier, exceptionalism is not only a matter of trends; an understanding of the pattern of inequality and the absolute level of class differentials is also essential to judge whether Sweden differs from other nations. It is difficult to find reliable data on these issues, however. Studies that employ highly comparable categorizations of social origin and educational careers are rare. An example of such an endeavour is the CASMIN project (see Erikson and Goldthorpe 1992; Erikson et al. 1988), in which a data bank was set up which includes England, France, Germany (the former Federal Republic), Hungary, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Poland, Scotland, and Sweden. These data are analysed in Chapter 4 by Müller, unfortunately on men only (since some of the data sets have no information on women). The results still give rise to several interesting conclusions of which three seem especially relevant here. Firstly, the pattern of class inequality is much the same in a range of Eastern and Western European nations. It is, with few exceptions, the same social classes that are advantaged (service, or upper middle classes), and the same that lag behind (farmers, workers, lower grade white-collar workers). Secondly, the global survival patterns in the national school systems differ. Interestingly, this is almost entirely due to different overall rates of school progression in the nations studied, and only to a limited extent due to inter-nation differences in the effects of class origin on transition propensities. That is, national educational systems vary substantially in the degree to which a cohort of students carries on to secondary and higher education, but national social class regimes vary relatively little in the impact they exert on children in reaching these levels of education.

Thirdly, though class origin effects are fairly similar in different countries, there are nevertheless differences. Sweden is characterized by 1) a greater than average advantage for the offspring of the upper service class, 2) relatively good opportunities for the children of unskilled workers, and 3) low educational attainment by the children of the petty bourgeoisie. In the comparison between Sweden and the U.S.A. by Hout and Dohan (Chapter 6), the two latter conclusions are supported, whereas the upper service class seems to be at least as advantaged in the U.S.A. as in Sweden. In sum, there is no sign of Sweden showing an overall lower level of educational inequality.

One problem with the CASMIN data-set is that it does not generally cover birth cohorts from the 1950s and later, but typically relies on respondents born between the 1910s and 1940s (most surveys on which the data-set is based were collected in the 1970s). Indeed, by merely splitting the national data sets into those aged 45–64 (born circa 1910–30), and those aged 30–44 (born circa 1931–45), some interesting qualifications of the results in Chapter 4 appear. It appears that whereas Sweden occupies an intermediate position with regard to the level of inequality in the oldest cohorts, it is among the most equal in the youngest, surpassed only by the former communist countries Poland and Hungary (Erikson and Jonsson 1993, Table 10:1). Ireland, Scotland, Germany, and — especially — France demonstrate levels of class differential that are clearly higher. For very similar birth cohorts (1935–49), the results by Hout and Dohan in Chapter 6 show the level of inequality to be virtually identical in Sweden and the U.S.A. (cf. Erikson and Jonsson 1993, Figure 10:3).

These results are still based on birth cohorts that did not experience the Swedish comprehensive school reform. Since we know that

5. See, for the U.S.A., Hauser and Featherman (1976); for France, Garnier and Raffalovich (1984); and, for Italy, Cobati (1990).

6. This analysis is based on the odds of achieving an upper secondary school diploma, and the degree of inequality calculated as the ratio of this odds between sons from class I/II (service class) and from class VII (unskilled workers).
educational inequality in Sweden is lowest among those born in the 1950s and later, this means that the cohorts most affected by the Swedish equalization are not included. Whether an analysis of younger cohorts would show Sweden to differ more or less from other nations is of course a moot point, since we know that neither the cohorts born in the 1960s nor in the 1970s have experienced much of an equalization in Sweden. Given the abovementioned results of stability over cohorts in most other countries investigated, we would expect the situation in Sweden to be somewhat more equal than the impression given by analysing cohorts born in the 1930s and 1940s. This is confirmed at least when comparing the Swedes, the British and the Germans born in the 1950s (see Chapter 5). The findings in Chapter 6 suggest that the level of inequality is similar in Sweden and the U.S.A., with a possible (though statistically not significant) lower level in Sweden for the two youngest birth cohorts studied, born 1955–59 and 1960–64. These results are the only ones for younger cohorts where we believe the comparability between nations to be high.

**CONCLUSION: SWEDEN A PROBABLE OUTLIER**

Is Sweden an exceptional case, then? When it comes to trends in educational inequality, perhaps the most reasonable conclusion is that Sweden is exceptional in that it is the only country thus far where we unambiguously find an equalization. This result is based on analyses of two different data sets of high quality; and the conclusion is also supported by a review of earlier national studies and official statistics collected during the last one hundred years (Erikson and Jonsson 1993, Ch. 3). But we cannot at this stage portray Sweden as a deviant case, since the impression we get may depend on cross-nation variation in reliability in the data available. We tend to believe that an equalization has in fact taken place in several other nations, among them Germany and, probably, Holland. However, given the results from other nations referred to above, it is not unlikely that the equalization has been relatively great in Sweden, and that it has, in contrast to some other nations, involved all traditionally disadvantaged social classes – farmers, manual workers, and the lower middle class.

Making statements about Swedish exceptionalism in terms of the level of class differentials in educational attainment is even more difficult than drawing conclusions about trends. It seems as if Sweden occupied an intermediate position for cohorts born in the 1910s and 1920s, while among those born in the 1930s and 1940s inequalities were relatively small. For younger cohorts, we are inclined to believe that the level of class inequality is lower in Sweden than in most other nations, though we have not yet been able to test this assumption rigorously.

In conclusion, then, we would not want to overstate the degree to which Sweden deviates from other industrial nations by showing less class inequality of educational opportunity. Comparative data, especially on recent cohorts, are still in short supply, and we find many striking similarities between Sweden and other nations. What may be most exceptional about Sweden is the combination of a reduction in class-based educational inequality, fairly substantial when judged in a fifty-year historical perspective, and a level of inequality which is at present relatively low.

**WHAT FACTORS EXPLAIN VARIATION IN EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY?**

The conclusion we draw from the analyses in this volume, and other relevant studies, is that Sweden is probably an outlier as regards educational inequality. This is partly because of the fairly substantial social class equalization in educational attainment experienced during this century and partly due to a relatively low level of educational inequality. Our aim below is to discuss whether the probable deviation we have found for Sweden may be due to historically specific characteristics of Swedish society and its school system, or whether the explanation should be sought in quite general factors, that would give similar effects if introduced to other countries. We do this by initiating a general discussion about what mechanisms generate social class differences in educational outcomes (where no relevant empirical results are available, this discussion will have to be partly hypothetical). In a concluding section, we try to identify which of these mechanisms most plausibly lie behind differences among nations and changes over time; in doing that, we also outline more and less successful strategies for reducing inequality in educational attainment.

To structure the presentation, we begin by identifying two general sets of factors that govern inequality of educational opportunity. As discussed in Chapter 1, these are: 1) differences in academic ability and educational performance between the offspring of different classes,

7. "Outlier" is used to mean a case positioned at an extreme end within a normal range.

8. It should be mentioned that the Swedish school system that we will discuss is the one existing up till the early 1990s. More recent changes have not yet had time to make an imprint on educational inequality.
and ii) differences between them in the propensity to continue on to higher levels (and/or academic tracks) of education. The greater the differences in ability, the greater will be the expected educational inequality, and similar expectations follow from differences in transition propensities, of course. It turns out that these two factors are of roughly equal importance in accounting for the association between social origin and educational attainment in Sweden (Erikson and Jonsson 1993).  

In addition to these two main factors, the number of students admitted at each educational level, in conjunction with any of the two general factors also influences the association between class origin and educational outcome, as discussed below ("Educational expansion"). These three sets of factors are exhaustive in that differences between nations and change over time must result from differences or changes in at least one of them.

**Class Differences in Academic Ability and Educational Performance**

There are at least five explanations for the differences between social categories in academic ability and performance. Firstly, it has been suggested that they depend upon genetic factors to a high degree (e.g. Herrnstein and Murray 1994), chiefly because individual differences in I.Q. are estimated to depend to some 50 per cent on such factors (Brody 1992). However, estimates of the maximum degree to which

9. This distinction is akin to that proposed by Boudon (1974), though it must be emphasized that we do not use his definition of “primary” and “secondary” effects; for us, the distinction is only a strategy for analysing class inequality in educational attainment, and not (as for Boudon) for explaining them. (Our discussion of explanations, which on several points differ from that of Boudon, follows below.)

10. Obviously, there may be an effect of anticipated choices on educational performance, which we have not been able to take into account, and will ignore in the following. If, for example, offspring of higher classes decide to continue in school already one or two years before the factual decision is taken – which is probably not unusual – they may increase their efforts in order to achieve high grades. To the extent that this is the case, we will underestimate the importance of educational choice, broadly defined, for class inequalities in educational attainment. We do not think this will affect our conclusions significantly.

11. Herrnstein and Murray observe that estimates range between 40 and 80 per cent and themselves suggest 60, which they regard as conservatively low. However, Brody, who seems to have made the most authoritative review of this issue, suggests 50 per cent and provides good arguments for this figure.

class differences, that is, the association between social origins and academic ability, may depend upon genetic factors suggest that they can at most account for only a minor degree of the total association (Erikson and Jonsson 1993, pp. 199–207). Thus ability and performance differences on group level must be supposed to largely result from other factors.

Secondly, the most natural alternative to the genetic explanation is of course related to differences in children’s home environments, broadly speaking the forms and patterns of interaction between parents and children and other differences in childhood conditions between social classes. There are several plausible mechanisms by which, for instance, more educated parents reinforce the academic ability of their offspring and act to improve their educational performance; these include verbal training during childhood and practical help with school work throughout their educational career. Moreover, parents can invest in good schools (if only, as in Sweden, by moving to a new area) or in extra tuition for their children.

The third explanation for social differences in academic achievement is largely a critique of the second. Instead of taking school standards as given and the home environment of the lower classes as problematic, some argue that it is the class and cultural bias in schools (or, in the production of knowledge) that is responsible for educational inequality (e.g. Young 1972). Even if one does not take a wholly relativistic position vis-à-vis what type of ability and performance should be rewarded in schools, several observations do indeed support the assumption that middle class norms pervade the educational system. Suffice it to mention here the results of Svensson (1971), which showed that social class differences in ability tests are smaller than those in standardized tests in school, which, in turn, are less correlated with social background than teacher-assigned grades (which are of great weight in the Swedish educational system). Though parent-child interaction probably accounts for some of the difference between the class bias in ability and that in grades, it is very plausible that some of this difference is attributable to the fact that over and above innate ability, and scholastic achievement in the class-room, teachers also tend to reward proper behaviour and adjustment to the “cultural” values prevailing in school.

12. About 33 per cent of the association between class origins and educational attainment is transmitted via I.Q. Since I.Q. most certainly is heavily dependent upon environmental factors related to social class, the effect of genetical factors must account for much less than one third of the association.

13. One obvious interpretation of this is that there is a discrimination of lower
Fourthly, differences in health and nutrition could also account for some of the association between class origin and academic ability. Furthermore, the effect of such factors may have lessened during this century, thanks to generally improved living conditions. Finally, social class differences in sibship size may be another factor of relevance, since there seems to be a (fairly weak) effect of number of siblings on scholastic achievement (e.g., Behrman and Taubman 1986).

We find it difficult to believe, however, that differences between industrial nations in any of the abovementioned respects are large enough to explain the variation in class inequality in educational attainment. Typical patterns of parent-child interaction within social classes are probably fairly similar between countries, and the improvement in health and nutrition could hardly have been so much more impressive in Sweden than elsewhere. With the exception of farmers in some nations, class differences in sibship size are small nowadays, and at least in Sweden it seems as if the decrease in large families has been fairly even across social classes (Erikson 1984). We believe that a “middle-class bias” is a universal characteristic of schools, though there are hardly any empirical studies to either support or reject this assumption.

In all, we think the relation between social background and educational performance is fairly invariant, not because it is given by nature but because the mechanisms that produce it—predominantly associated with primary socialization and other childhood conditions—are entrenched in all Western societies. It follows that we should look for a possible Swedish exceptionalism in other terms.

class pupils (cf. Kerckhoff 1976). However, there seems to be sparse evidence that such discrimination, so to speak, works in a conscious and direct way (e.g., Mehan 1992; Lindblad 1994). Whether there exist more indirect types of discrimination, for instance connected to teacher expectations and prejudices, is under debate (e.g., Brophy 1988; Harris and Rosenthal 1985). Our point here is that there is no need to resort to explanations in terms of direct discrimination to assume that a “cultural bias” exists in schools.

14. Partly in an attempt also to provide children from homes with less of an educational tradition with favourable surroundings during early childhood, the availability of public day-care centers increased in Sweden during the 1970s especially. However, the empirical studies carried out so far do not support the optimistic vision of a consequential effect on educational performance. Though the time spent at such institutions correlates positively with educational attainment for boys, also controlling for social background, there is no sign that the pre-school experiences of children from lower classes compensate their relative disadvantage in educational attainment—there is no interaction between origin, day-care experience and educational outcome (Jonsson 1994).

CLASS DIFFERENCES IN TRANSITION PROPENSITIES

Next, let us consider the second set of factors outlined above, namely class differences in educational transition rates. These are of a different type altogether; while educational performance is largely a consequence of continuous socialisation and “intellectual practice” during childhood and early adolescence, educational choice is a future-oriented decision, often crystallized to a few focal points in an educational career.

As is shown in Chapter 1 in this volume, at each level of educational performance—as measured by grade point averages (GPA)—children from the upper service class are more likely to continue on to upper secondary education than children with working class origins. The absolute differences are small at both ends of the GPA distribution, whereas relative distances between social origins (measured by log odds ratios) are smaller at higher levels of GPA. A similar pattern stands out for the transition to university for students at given types of secondary school, though here, relative social class distances are the same at all levels of GPA.

It should be emphasized that in all social classes, transition propensities grow with increasing GPAs. Though the growth takes place at different levels for children from different social origins, teacher-assigned measures of previous performance generally function as a strong signal about whether to continue in school or leave; in fact, GPA is a far more important predictor of transition propensity than origin factors such as parents’ social class and education. This may not come as a surprise, but it indicates that people from all origins in general make rational evaluations of their chances of succeeding at higher levels of education, thereby refuting the more strenuous interpretations of value or cultural theory (cf. Gambetta 1987).

A Model of Educational Choice

Why, then, do children with the same level of educational performance make educational choices that are correlated with their social origin? Our point of departure is that individuals rationally consider the costs and benefits associated with a given transition or choice of branch of study (cf. Becker 1964/75; Boudon 1974). They will choose within a feasible set of choices (Elster 1979), that is, among alternatives that are judged to be available within given constraints. If, for instance, selection to higher educational levels is based on previous performance, those with a poor record will, naturally, not have any choice at all. In
contrast to some economists, we doubt that the considerations underlying (non-constrained) educational choices could be based on lifetime earnings, since such calculations would be too complicated for the average student to make, even if, say, income careers in various occupations were known. Instead, we believe that the calculation includes only a rough estimate of what income, working conditions, etc. different types of study will lead to.

Let us construct a very simple model of these considerations, in order to facilitate the discussion. We assume that the student has some idea of the benefits that will follow from a successful completion of a certain type of study, including the benefits that this education will provide during the years of study. The value of these benefits we call \( R \). The student will also have some idea of the benefits that would follow if he failed to complete the education in question. These benefits can be assumed to be the same for all different types of education under consideration. The total cost of an education is estimated to be \( C \) and the probability of successfully completing the studies is denoted \( P \). Benefits and costs must be measured by the same unit. Clearly, this unit is not measured in monetary terms, though economic considerations weigh heavily. Instead, we have to assume that the unit is a psychological category. How the unit is scaled is, however, arbitrary. We may therefore choose to set the possible benefits that the student will gain if he fails to complete his studies at zero. His costs, in the case of failure, are assumed to remain at \( C \). The estimated utility of these studies for him will then be

\[
U = (B-C)P-C(1-P),
\]

which can be simplified to

\[
U = PB - C
\]

His utility estimate will, thus, be equal to the estimated benefits times the probability of success minus the estimated costs. He will also estimate the utility of entering the labour market.\(^{15}\) We assume that he will make such implicit calculations for all the possible alternatives, that is, those within his feasible set, and that he will choose the alternative with the highest \( U \). This assumption does not require that an individual calculates exact utility estimates of the different alternatives (which is hardly possible), only that he is able to rank them.\(^{16}\)

We believe that model (1) may help us to structure our considerations of the process of educational inequality. There is, however, at least one factor discussed in the literature, but missing in our model, namely risk aversion. Assume two educational alternatives, \( i \) and \( j \), with similar costs and where

\[
P_iB_i = P_jB_j, \quad \text{while}
\]

\[
P_i < P_j \quad \text{and consequently}
\]

\[
B_i > B_j
\]

Thus, education \( i \) gives high rewards but also carries a high risk of failure, while \( j \) is a low risk education leading to smaller rewards. According to model (1) the utility of these two alternatives is the same, but the more risk averse a person is, the more will he prefer alternative \( j \).\(^{17}\) For the model to cover variations in risk aversion, we would need to include a factor to account for the tendency of more risk averse persons to prefer alternatives with a low cost and a low probability of failure. Since the model basically is of heuristic value for understanding educational inequality, we prefer to keep it in this simple form, while remembering that the effects of possible differences in risk aversion between classes are not covered by it.\(^{18}\)

The model is intended to direct our attention to essential factors that govern educational transitions. If it is to help us to understand educational inequality, we must be able to find out why students from different social classes have their educational choices differently ordered by utility, without necessarily assuming that their orders of

\(^{15}\) This utility can be seen as the value of earnings foregone if he continues at school plus the benefits he expects to receive after the time when he would have finished his education. The utility of leaving the educational system for a job depends on the character of the labour market and on the amount of social resources, among other things. Relatively high utility could be expected if the student can find a job in, say, an internal labour market, with expectations of improved working conditions and increases in salary due to work-life experience. The utility may be relatively low in a situation, similar to the one which seems to prevail in the U.S.A., where also some years of additional schooling count as a merit, even if they do not lead to a completed exam.

\(^{16}\) This model closely resembles ones proposed by Halsey, Heath and Ridge (1980) and by Richard Breen and John Goldthorpe (personal communication).

\(^{17}\) There are also other ways in which risk aversion could influence the choice of educational alternatives, for example, by producing non-linear, or threshold, effects of \( P, B \) or \( C \) on \( U \) (cf. Elster 1986).

\(^{18}\) To account for risk aversion, one could, for instance, assume that the student will choose the alternative which has the highest \( U \) and for which the condition holds that \((1-P)C < R\), where \( R \) is a measure of risk\(^{19}\) acceptance, i.e., the highest risk an individual is willing to take. One consequence of keeping the model simple, is that it does not entirely accommodate the interdependence of consecutive choices over the educational career. For instance, the choice structure in a given educational system may be such that early choices circumscribe the parameters of
preference for various educations are different. In model terms, we must understand why C, B, and/or P – and in consequence U – interact with class origin.

Actual and Perceived Benefits, Costs, and Probabilities

In the final analysis, benefits, costs and success probabilities are all perceived entities. It is helpful, however, to distinguish between what we shall call actual and perceived B, C, and P. We assume that there is a large real, or actual element in most students’ estimates of, say, future salaries, but other elements also influence these estimates. We could, for instance, imagine that a generally very optimistic person would estimate both P and B to be higher and C to be lower than the average student would. While there may be substantial individual variation in perceptions (given actual conditions), with few exceptions we see no reason to assume the existence of class differences in perceptions – differences in actual conditions are normally sufficient to explain class inequalities in educational attainment.

Our view is in contrast to some sociological explanations of educational choice arguing that individuals in their decisions typically are exposed to forces out of their control, which gives a “distorted” view of the real situation. For example, it is not unusual to assume that social norms, class-related values, or some psychological mechanisms prevent people from making rational decisions. As we see it, assumptions that distorted views are associated with social background – as exemplified by the hypothesis of over-adaptation (Gambetta 1987) – should only be put forward if empirical evidence suggests that explanations based on actual class differences do not suffice.19 This does not mean, however, that individuals’ perceptions are unrelated to their social setting. As will be elaborated below, an explanation of class

choice at the next level (e.g., “dead ends”). This may come about in different ways. Goldthorpe (forthcoming) notes that opportunity costs for not choosing an educational alternative with high probability of success at the first branching point (say, vocational schooling), may in some systems be high because, if the subject fails at the other alternative (academic), he may not be allowed a second chance to take up vocational education due to age-limits on entry or on the provision of financial support. A model that is able to take consecutive choices into account is currently being developed by Richard Breen (lecture at Stockholm University, April 1995).

19. The problems of “distorted-view” explanations are akin to those of the concept of “false consciousness”, forcefully criticised by Lockwood (1981), among others.

inequalities in educational attainment must to some extent, we believe, rest on the notion that family resources and social relations influence perceptions, in addition to affecting actual circumstances. We will also discuss the possibility that the benefit of a specific type of study may differ between students from different classes because there is a negative weight on a given level of benefits if a person experienced social demotion in achieving it, as compared with those who have experienced social advancement – in this situation, however, the weights need not vary among social classes.

So, what does the empirical evidence suggest? The discussion that follows will mainly be based on results for Sweden, though we know that several findings are valid for other nations as well. It serves a dual purpose. Firstly, we will outline what factors are generally important for educational choice. Our discussion will revolve around three groups of factors, namely (i) resources in the family of origin, (ii) the institutional structure of the educational system, and (iii) incentives for school continuation. Such factors could all bring about a variation in transition rates between social classes, and class differences, in turn, may vary over time and between countries. Secondly, the presentation leads up to conclusions about what mechanisms may explain educational decisions. On the basis of these proposed mechanisms – referring to the model of educational choice presented here – we then discuss differences between Sweden and other industrial nations in class inequality in educational outcomes.

Class Differences in Resources

Social classes differ in terms of the resources that they control. The types of resource that are most commonly acknowledged to determine the life-chances of the next generation are economic, cultural, and social. As discussed below, social origin probably also has a direct effect of on educational aspirations.

Economic Resources and Equality of Condition

The economic circumstances of the family of origin affect transition probabilities by influencing the costs of schooling. For parents, the burden of financially supporting their children’s education will be less, the better the economic circumstances of the family, since the marginal cost must then be smaller. Therefore, students from more affluent homes on average get more financial support during their studies,
making the opportunity cost for schooling less for these students—
their standard of living at university may in fact not be much worse
than if they had left school after secondary education (in which case
they would probably not have received any economic backing).
Moreover, the estimated cost of engaging in lengthy university studies
may also be greater for the poorer one’s economic background is, because
the probability that the parents will step in to cover the costs for loans
or an extra year in education in the case of failure is lower.

In theory, then, economic resources are crucial because they are the
main determinant of educational costs for the individual. There is also
abundant evidence from several countries that economic conditions in
the family of origin affect educational attainment. The association be-
 tween economic background and education found in cross-sectional
analyses suggests that an economic equalization between social classes
would promote equality of educational opportunity, though such an
effect has hitherto been more assumed than demonstrated.20 The
results from the time series analysis in Chapter 2 support the assump-
tion that there is a positive relation between equality of condition and
equality of educational opportunity. It seems that unemployment rates
and income inequality are external factors that influence class inequal-
ity in educational outcomes. The more economic security and predict-
ability, and the more equal the distribution of resources among families
of origin, the lower the level of educational inequality.

Our hypothesis is that two separate (but correlated) mechanisms
operate. The first concerns the distances between social classes in
terms of economic resources, which directly influence relative costs for
schooling. The second maintains that fluctuations or interruptions in
parents’ income (e.g., due to spells of unemployment) reduce the
expected economic support.21 In times of high unemployment, the
anticipated support from parents, who are employed but face an exces-
sive risk of losing their job, may likewise decrease.

As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Sweden scored high
both on economic equality and economic security (in terms of low
unemployment rates) in the post-war period, and has also experienced
an equalization in living conditions over time. Other nations for which
we have indications of a reduction in educational inequality seem to
share these characteristics to a greater or lesser degree. They include
Holland and Norway (De Graaf and Ganzboon 1993; Lindbakk
1993), where income inequality was similar to that in Sweden and was
relatively small in the 1980s (Gottschalk and Smeeding 1995), suggest-
ing that income differences have decreased during the post-war period.

The finding in Chapter 5 that Germany has experienced an equal-
ization in educational opportunities is also, we think, in accordance
with this hypothesis. As discussed by Jonsson, Mills and Müller,
Germany has in the post-war period travelled much the same way as
Sweden towards greater economic security for the manual working
class by means of economic prosperity, low unemployment rates, and a
well-developed insurance system. The higher degree of inequality in
economic resources in Germany (perhaps in combination with a more
selective educational system) has, however, kept class inequality in edu-
cational attainment at a substantially higher level.22

Increasing economic security among the most disadvantaged social
groups and full employment have, however, characterized several
Western nations during the post-war period and up to the mid 1970s.
In spite of this fact, no general reduction in educational inequality has
appeared. A possible hypothesis is that these features may not in them-
selves guarantee such an equalization. Perhaps it can only be achieved
in combination with either increasing equality in living conditions or
far-reaching educational reforms.

At the same time as costs are an essential factor for explaining edu-
cational choice in historical perspective, it is possible that the actual
cost of schooling is less important nowadays. In Sweden, costs are
almost zero at secondary level, for example. Moreover, for a fairly long
period now there have been high risks associated with leaving school
because of the difficulty for young persons without any secondary edu-
cation of finding a job (though this is somewhat compensated for by
relatively high wages in jobs that do exist). About 90 per cent of the

20 An analysis on aggregate level data from 15 nations suggests that greater
income dispersion in a society is associated with less social fluidity (Erikson and
Goldthorpe 1992, Ch. 11).

21 It is also possible that the experience of poverty and/or unemployment may
lower the self-confidence of children and their parents, that is, that there is a
psychological mechanism that, so to speak, causes them to enter economic insecurity
as a negative factor for the probability of success as well. It is also claimed in cer-
tain socialization theories that childhood experiences of irregular income careers
may engender a feeling that it is not worthwhile to engage in long-term invest-
ments such as education (Lane 1972), which would act as a negative weight on per-
ceived benefits. As pointed out by Gambetta (1987), such assumptions imply that
children have a distorted view of their true opportunities. In general, we think it is
questionable to invoke assumptions that some social groups are more risk-averse
than others, when it is in fact “objectively” defined risks that differ.

22 Inequality in disposable income is actually not much greater in Germany
than in Sweden, Norway or the Netherlands (Gottschalk and Smeeding 1995).
However, income differences among families with children are clearly greater in
Germany than in the other three nations (Rainwater and Smeeding 1995).
pupils leaving compulsory school do actually continue on to some form of secondary education. At tertiary level, on the other hand, there are tangible indirect costs for the student (for food, literature, and accommodation), mostly covered by state loans at low interest rates. Since some academic branches of study at secondary level more or less have to be followed by further education if they are to form a viable alternative in the labour market, the choice between academic and vocational studies is also affected by the costs, benefits and probability of success of tertiary schooling.

In line with this description of costs for education in Sweden, one conclusion we draw from the empirical results of the Swedish Commission on Educational Inequality is that economic background may not be the main factor behind educational inequality, especially not for early educational decisions. First, we investigated the relative effects of parents’ class, education, and income on the transition to secondary level for children born in the 1970s, controlling for GPA. The effects of parents’ education, in particular, as well as their social class, are stronger than income. It may be that economic circumstances are not well reflected by income, and that some of their effect is instead channeled through parents’ class and education. Class may, for instance, be a better indicator of economic position, especially as reported income is not a good measure of economic standard among employers and the self-employed (including farmers). Also, class position may be more indicative of future or life-time income, income security, and chances of accumulating wealth.

The assumption of inadequacies in measuring economic standing by income is supported in another analysis, where we managed to measure economic circumstances in much greater detail. But at the same time as this analysis proved economic background to be important for transition to upper secondary school, measures of parents’ education and cultural habits were even more impressive.

Secondly, when summarizing several analyses of the relative weight of parents’ social class and their education, it appears that both of these factors exert strong and independent (net) influences on decisions to continue to higher levels of education, and that the latter factor is slightly more important.

These findings support the notion that economic resources in the childhood family are not the only mechanism by which origin factors have an impact on educational attainment; especially, we believe that the strong effect of parents’ education indicates that a different set of mechanisms (discussed below) is also crucial. In the Swedish school system, the difference in cost between choosing an academic branch of study, for example, technology at secondary level (which prepares both for university studies and for the job market) and a vocational branch, for example carpentry, is slight (three years as compared to two); but nevertheless the importance of social background is evident here too.

Finally, even more persuasive in challenging economic explanations is the following finding: the choice of “stream” or “track” at grades 7–9 in the compulsory school (limited to three subjects) – which has no effect at all on the length or costs of schooling – is dependent on parents’ education and social class, even when ability level is controlled for (Härnqvist 1994; Erikson and Jonsson 1993, Figure 7.2). The strength of the origin effect for the first educational decision in Sweden is actually about the same as (in fact, even slightly stronger than) its strength for later transitions.

These results, we think, convincingly suggest that background factors other than economic resources are important for explaining the association between social origin and educational decisions – such non-economic factors are probably even more important than the economic ones for early decisions, including the transition to upper secondary school (the Gymnasium).

We know less about the relative weight of different factors for the transition to university in Sweden, due to lack of data, though there are good reasons to believe that at this branching point economic back-

23. The findings reported below are presented in Erikson and Jonsson (1993, Ch. 7).

24. The study is based on the 1968 level of living survey (Erikson and Aberg 1987). We used information on a number of assets (such as owner-occupied house, car, summer house, etc.), and cash margins from personal interviews, and then register information on disposable household income, wealth, social welfare, pensions etc. The analysis is based on retrospective information about the educational attainment of the interviewees’ children, which means that our measures of cultural capital and economic resources may refer to a period after the children left home. As some compensation for this, we have included several economic variables annually from eight years before the interview and onwards. One comparative advantage with this analysis, then, is that temporary fluctuations in the household economy have not caused any irreliability.

25. A problem with this analysis is that it covers cohorts born as early as 1925–47 (and thus educated before the comprehensive school reform). Consequently, the findings may not apply to younger cohorts.

26. Other results that point to the importance of social background factors for early school decisions that are not of prime economic importance are reported in a study of decisions on streaming in Junior Secondary Schools in France (Duru-Bellat and Mingat 1989).
ground is salient. Overall, economic conditions in the family of origin may stand for a substantial part of the cross-national variation in educational inequality at university level. This is because nations diverge on several points that are of relevance for costs, for example, the length of different studies, the direct costs of higher studies, and the distribution of income and wealth between social classes.

Cultural and Educational Resources

If economic background is not the only factor behind class inequalities in educational outcomes, what other factors are essential? There are a number of explanations referring to subtle class differences in “status cultures”, or life-style generally, distinctions that are assumed to be important for educational careers (cf. Collins 1971; Bourdieu 1984). Children from higher classes are supposed to master the cultural codes that prevail in schools and feel at ease with the values, manners, and expectations that dominate the educational system (which, as was mentioned above, may also improve their academic achievement). Referring to our model of educational choice, we may say that in this interpretation higher classes reap more benefits from higher education because the consumption value of such education is high for them — in short, they like being in school better.27 Because those bequeathed with cultural resources from their upbringing are well adapted to the requirements of the school, their probability of success is also high. In an extreme version of this thesis, the possession of “cultural capital” — especially, linguistic and cultural competence transmitted through socialization — is necessary for success in school (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bourdieu 1977).

A special form of cultural competence which is highly consequential for educational choices, is (tacit) knowledge about the school system, fostering strategic behaviour. Important here for example is what decisions are likely to constrain subsequent opportunities, and what choices will maximize the probabilities of achieving favourable occupations and labour market rewards. Higher class children are on average more capable of navigating the educational system because in many cases their parents — and perhaps also older brothers and sisters, or friends and relatives — achieved higher education, and can give accurate advice at crucial decision points in the school career. The advice at earlier bifurcation points will typically be to stay on and choose a general academic study programme. Especially at the transition to university, one type of information and corresponding advice that could be valuable is that you do not have to be particularly clever to succeed at university. This is something that is well-known to many middle-class parents, whereas a recurrent myth to the opposite effect could deter working class children with moderately high grade point averages from enrolling at university. Superior knowledge about the school system help to increase both the actual and the perceived probabilities of success — especially if defined as success at higher levels in a series of transitions — for children from higher social origins.28

As is evident from the foregoing, we believe that cultural resources are best captured by reference to parents’ own education. But there is also reason to emphasize another great advantage bestowed upon children whose parents have themselves achieved higher education, namely that these children can receive competent help with their school work. Given that much learning takes place outside schools, the teaching of academic and vocational skills carried out by parents are probably more important than their inculcation of cultural habits. Such “educational resources” afford well-educated parents with a strong and well-founded self-confidence in their children’s probability of success, particularly, we assume, at lower levels of education.29

28. Some would argue that this is in fact a matter of costs, since we can imagine that information about the school system could be achieved with some effort (the cost will then equal the time it takes to get the information). However, especially at lower levels of education, it seems likely that the information is available for free (through study guidance and counselling), but that in interpreting this information parents with higher education have an advantage over those with less education. Both study guidance and literature on career advice may attenuate the importance of tacit knowledge about the school system, but hardly erase it.

29. The results reported by Duru-Bellat and Mingat (1989, Table 4) are in line with our argument that actual \( P \) is higher for children from higher classes. They find that the growth of academic ability (as measured by achievement tests) during the first two years of the junior secondary school is greatest for children from higher class. The authors themselves interpret the result as showing that these children profit more from the stay in junior secondary school, and that the school therefore plays an important role for educational inequality. Our own interpretation would be that it is not unequal treatment by the school that produces this result; rather, it reflects precisely the out-of-school learning processes that we believe to be at work. The “fault” of the school is rather that the equal treatment probably provided is not sufficient for overcoming the “handicap” that lower class children experience. The question of which of these two interpretations best accords with reality does not matter for our assumption that class differences in actual \( P \)s are of importance.
An explanation of class differences in educational choice in terms of educational resources is attractive because it does not involve any assumptions that "true" benefits from education, or "true" probabilities of success, are obscured to lower classes: since they cannot count on receiving as much out-of-school help as children from higher classes, their actual probability of success is lower.

It is difficult to assess the importance of cultural factors for explaining class inequalities in educational transitions. Empirical evidence is often indirect because the subtle distinctions that function as cultural dividends, and the complex web of actions and dispositions that can be regarded as "cultural," make it difficult to study directly in large-scale, generalizable surveys. Qualitative studies regularly show cultural differences to be salient for educational careers (cf. the review by Mehan 1992), but typically fail to distinguish between cultural mechanisms and factors arising from socio-economic circumstances. Quantitative studies show that (sometimes fairly crude) measures of cultural capital, like "reading material" in the home, and parents' cultural habits (going to the theatre, to museums etc.) have an impact on children's educational attainment also among those coming from similar socio-economic circumstances (for evidence on Swedish data, see Erikson and Jonsson 1993, Table 7:3; also, see Teachman 1987; De Graaf 1986; DiMaggio and Mohr 1985). An indication that cultural and educational resources are important is of course given by the fact that parents' education regularly proves to be as important as, or even slightly more important than social class origin for educational attainment. Unfortunately, such an effect does not reveal exactly which of the abovementioned mechanisms is the more important.

Neither the qualitative, nor the quantitative studies carried out so far have been able to specify how cultural resources interact with social class, or, indeed, how they differ between countries. This is however illustrated indirectly by the results in Chapter 4 below. They show that the educational advantage of children from the upper service class in Sweden is relatively great, and similar results stand out for Germany and Hungary. Müller's interpretation of this pattern is that in countries which shared the German heritage of higher education (such as Sweden, and the former Austrian-Hungarian monarchy), the upper service class consisted to a large extent of a status group — the Bildungs-bürgertum — which derived its position and values from higher education. This Akademiker-tradition, which emphasizes university education, may still influence the upper service class, and may lead them to hold educational achievements in high esteem; or, in terms of our model of educational choice, the benefits from higher education (in this case, the consumption value) will be particularly high for these children.

Does the importance of cultural and educational resources change over time? Bourdieu's view would seem to imply stability in the effect of cultural resources because such distinctions refer to a relative dimension; mastery of the "dominant culture" always escapes the lower classes, since it depends on understanding cultural codes that are constantly changed in order to exclude outsiders. On the other hand, Bourdieu (1977) has also proposed that the transmission of cultural capital, as compared to social or economic factors, is becoming increasingly important for social reproduction. Others would no doubt claim that the rapid spread of popular and other forms of culture through mass media has led to a diffusion of cultural resources, and hence to a reduction of their significance. The dramatic increase in schooling in general should have had a similar effect (Halsey, Heath and Ridge 1980), and particularly the prolonging of compulsory schooling should have equipped low-educated parents with more educational resources. Insofar as educational resources are most important, there is in fact reason to expect an ongoing equalization of educational attainment in most nations because of the decreasing difference in schooling in an absolute sense — the absence of such a general pattern of equalization, on the other hand, suggests either that educational resources are not salient, or that the relative dimension is most important also for such resources.

We believe that the net effect of parents' educational qualifications (controlling for class origin) is a good indicator of cultural and educational resources in the family of origin. When analyzing trends in this net effect, and trends in the net effect of class background, it turns out that in Sweden, the importance of both the class and cultural dimensions of the family of origin have decreased over time (Jonsson 1987, 1998; cf. Chapter 6 in this volume). Whatever the precise mechanisms behind the net association between parents' formal qualifications and children's educational attainment, then, it seems as if they are not resistant to change. Moreover, the decreasing importance of cultural and/or educational resources in Sweden has contributed to the class equalization measured as the "gross" association between class origin and educational attainment.

In trying to explain educational choices, there are several black boxes, one of which concerns the importance of cultural and educa-

30. It should be mentioned that in these analyses it has not been possible to control for educational performance or ability. The declining effect is thus a combination of effects on educational performance and educational transitions, though we believe that the change in the former relationship is marginal.
tional resources. The greatest problem is not to disclose the mechanisms at work, but to determine their relative weight. We ourselves believe that the subtle cultural differences expressed in manners, styles of dress, aesthetic tastes and the like, are not particularly consequential for educational success in Sweden today, though such differences doubtless exist. Whether Sweden differs from other industrialized nations in this respect is not possible for us to judge, though it may be that comparatively small and egalitarian societies have a more equal distribution of cultural resources.\(^{31}\) In contrast to some societies, there is no dominating elite culture, and popular movements in Sweden (among them the influential labor movement) have not pursued class-based cultural policies.\(^{32}\) In addition, selection to higher education — to the extent that it occurs — is almost exclusively based on relatively "objective" criteria, such as grades and tests, and not on personal interviews, for example.

It is, we think, more accurate to interpret the positive effects of parents' level of education on children's educational outcomes as working through 1) better strategic knowledge about the educational system; and 2) the anticipation of more qualified help with the learning of cognitive and other types of skills that improve both scholastic aptitude tests and teacher-assigned grades (the major effect of these factors being to raise actual probabilities of success). The second mechanism is — just as we argued above for the effect of family background on academic ability — probably fairly stable over time and similar across nations. It is the knowledge about the school system that we believe to be the crucial factor for understanding why the effect of parents' educational decreases over time in Sweden. Moreover, this factor has the potential of accounting for inter nation differences in class inequalities in educational outcomes. Our hypothesis is that the variation in the effect of knowledge of the school system is not primarily, however, due to differences between social classes in the ability to master esoteric information about educational strategies — instead it is due to variations in the complexity of the school system to which these strategies relate. This is elaborated below, in the section "The institutional structure of the educational system".

The Direct Effect of Social Position on Aspirations

Economic resources are decisive for actual (and, perhaps, perceived) costs attached to decisions about whether or not to continue school, and cultural and educational resources in the family of origin influence the probability of success at a given level of education (and may affect actual benefits from schooling due to its consumption value). In addition, there is presumably an effect of social origin on perceived benefits, because origin status determines offspring's educational and occupational aspirations.\(^{33}\)

To elaborate this, we need to go back to the traditional assumption that class differences in educational attainment can be explained by values attached to education (Hyman 1953), or achievement ambitions (Lipset and Bendix 1959). Educational aspirations, it was claimed, were simply greater among middle class children than among the offspring of the working class because the former internalize more successfully the achievement goal, and learn to defer gratification (Rosen 1956). These explanations, which could be regarded as cultural, were criticized in an influential article by Keller and Zavalloni (1964). They argued that there is one absolute and one relative aspect of ambition, and that working class children are low on the former — because their opportunity to reach the goals genuinely is less — but not on the latter.\(^{34}\)

Boudon (1974) developed this view, maintaining that the social position of parents per se has a strong effect on their offspring's educational choices. If children evaluate educational alternatives with their parents' socioeconomic position as a yardstick, it follows that children

31. Heath (1995), in a review of the research report edited by Shavit and Blossfeld (1993), suggests that the fact that educational equalization is only found in Sweden and Holland is a consequence of "the greater social integration of underprivileged groups into a common national culture" in these (small) countries. However, as evident from Chapters 5 and 6 in this volume, Germany has also experienced an equalization, and the level of educational inequality in the U.S.A. is about the same as in Sweden. It is not easy to reconcile these cases with primarily cultural factors.

32. In introducing Bourdieu to a Swedish audience, Broady (1985) comments that cultural capital in Sweden is more "spread out" than in France, where it is more centralized, hierarchical, and differentiated. Though for Bourdieu himself "culture" is the dominant culture (typically, that of intellectuals and the upper classes), Broady maintains that in Sweden symbolic capital emanating from popular movements and other non-profit organizations may have the same function.

33. There are numerous empirical results, especially generated by the "Wisconsin Model", showing that social origin exerts a strong influence on educational and occupational aspirations (e.g., Hauser, Tsai and Sewell 1983; for Sweden, see Mänttä 1981).

34. An obvious objection to the assumption that traditional values make working class children refrain from taking higher education, is that it fails to make intelligible the enormous increase of secondary and tertiary education among children from lower classes during this century (e.g. Halsey, Heath and Ridge 1980).
from higher classes have more to lose from not going on to higher education. They risk social demotion by abstaining, whereas children from lower classes may in fact rise socially by the mere fact of continuing on to secondary schooling.\textsuperscript{35} Thus, according to Boudon, different social benefits attached to decisions about school continuation create class-specific values for various educational choices even though (relative) aspiration levels on average may be the same among social classes.\textsuperscript{36} We should note that it is the \emph{perceived}, and not the actual benefits that are the issue here — the consequences of higher education in terms of income etc. may be equally positive for children from all social origins, though the evaluation of these consequences differ.

In stylized form, the relation between educational level and its perceived benefits for children from working class and service class origins, respectively, may be illustrated as in Figure 1.

The perceived benefits of additional levels of education increase sharply up to some neutral point, which is determined by the aspiration level of the student. Like Keller and Zavalloni, we believe that this point is dependent upon the education and social class of the parents (it is also, of course, determined by the student’s previous performance and demonstrated ability at school, though we are dealing only with educational choice at given levels of ability in this section). The perceived benefits of education at levels beyond the neutral point continue to increase, but at a slower rate than below it. Since the neutral point tends to be higher for students from the service class, they will find the benefits from, and hence the utility of, achieving more education to be greater than students from the lower classes. For students, whose parents are exceptionally well-educated, benefits may not level off at all.

It is seldom noted that this theory, though seemingly based on

\textsuperscript{35} Note that this view is consistent with the view that all social classes have the same preference order of educational qualifications. Everyone may agree that higher education is preferable to lower, but the level at which parents protest if their child wants to leave school varies directly in accordance with social origin: parents from lower classes are more likely to be content if their son or daughter chooses a shorter vocational course, and parents from higher classes will seldom be satisfied unless their children enrol at university.

\textsuperscript{36} Boudon also argues that children pay a price for leaving their class of origin, since they risk losing social ties with friends and relatives. This effect would then reinforce the general social attainment effect. We are less convinced that the cost of losing the social network is important for decisions about leaving or continuing school — higher class children, for example, frequently move away from home for higher education and social mobility does not seem to result in a general loss of social ties (Goldthorpe 1980/87); at any rate, the effect of parents’ social position on aspirations must be considered the most important.

\textsuperscript{37} Experimental studies in psychology seem to imply that the preference of not losing to winning is a quite general personality trait. Tversky and Kahneman (1986, p. 126) refer to several studies showing that “the displeasure associated with losing a sum of money is generally greater than the pleasure associated with winning the same amount.”
less relevant — on the other hand, it is a strong candidate for accounting for the existing similarities between countries.

Social Resources

Social networks are often assumed to be important for social reproduction because social ties facilitate the probability of getting a good job, both at entry to the labour market and for the individual’s subsequent occupational career (cf. De Graaf and Flap 1988), perhaps especially if such ties are weak and thus extend the social network outside the closer circle of friends and relatives (Granovetter 1973). But social resources, broadly speaking, may also influence educational careers. For example, empirical studies show that measures of friends’ educational plans are an important predictor of educational attainment, and also mediate parts of the effect of social origin on such attainment (e.g., Hauser, Tsai and Sewell 1983; Jencks, Grouse and Mueser 1983).

The importance of social relations for educational attainment can be explained, we believe, with reference to diffusion processes. First, as pointed out by Coleman (1988), children who have large amounts of “social capital” at their disposal through networks and communities have access to adequate and cheap information. Second, as elaborated above, superior educational resources in the family of origin not only confer knowledge about educational strategies upon children. They also lead to better achievements because well-educated parents can offer their children more qualified help with practical school work. Children also help each other — friends do their homework together, for example. Through such processes of interaction among children, parents’ educational, and to some extent cultural, resources are diffused within the social circles that children belong to. In terms of our model of educational choice, the diffusion of both information and out-of-school learning increases the probability of success for a given educational alternative.

In addition, social relations may in various ways also increase the benefits of a certain educational alternative. First, the benefits during studies will be higher if you make the same choice as your best friend(s), though we doubt that this benefit will affect choices very much. Second, aspiration levels tend to be adjusted to those of ones friends. Consistent with the argument in the previous section, that losses are more important than gains, we believe that such adjustments typically take an upward direction; that is, social relations, or social capital, bestow resources upon individuals rather than impose restrictions upon them. Referring to Figure 1 above, having friends with higher aspirations will then tend to move one’s own inflexion point (at which perceived benefits of an additional education level off) to the right — which is similar to saying that such social resources function as having a higher social origin. This could be thought of as a diffusion of aspirations. Third, especially within elite schools, there may be a strong effect of social network on the expected benefits in the labour market. “The old school tie” is precisely a benefit-enhancing social resource, and one major reason for choosing to go to exclusive schools is no doubt that it is seen as a social investment which will yield high benefits.

Coleman (1988) suggests that social capital also induces prescriptive behaviour; in our case, educational choices. For instance, attending higher education may be a social norm. Explanations of educational choice in terms of norms are problematic, however, at least if we take this to mean that individual action is restricted by, or even propelled by, others, who have a right to confer sanctions on the individual if he chooses the “wrong” alternative. As often pointed out, if educational choices were governed by (class-specific) norms, the dramatic expansion of higher education would not have occurred. Similarly, as mentioned above, if it were a norm for working-class children not to attain higher education, it is difficult to understand why they do in fact largely go on to higher education if they perform well in school. The social norm explanation has greater force if we assume that in some communities, or in some social circles, there is a strong urge to succeed in school (cf. Boudon 1974; Coleman 1988). Such strong and common values could emerge in “functional communities” where there is a high degree of social closure — for example if one’s parents mix socially with one’s friends’ parents, and if there is an active participation in social institutions such as the school and the church (Coleman and Hoffer 1987).

We are not convinced by this limited version of norm explanation which focuses on sub-groups with close social relations; either. Typically, norms can only be successfully upheld for early educational transitions (such as drop-out propensities), where it is possible for everyone to comply. But for explaining these choices, it is clearly sufficient to refer to the extremely high perceived benefits of staying on (partly because of the strong desire to avoid social demotion), combined with small costs, and often also high probabilities of success. In fact, the “utility consideration” may be so unequivocal as to render all alternatives but one — to continue at school — as totally unrealistic, thus creating a situation reminiscent of one in which norms or structural barriers are the explanatory factors (that is, a situation where the feasible set is restricted to only one outcome).

Social resources, like cultural and educational resources, are likely
to vary little between such big entities as nations, though they may be of high value in subgroups of the populations. The effect of social resources on educational inequality is dependent on segregation and on the quantitative importance of exclusive schools, and may then vary somewhat because the prevalence of these phenomena differs among nations (see further discussions below on ‘Contextual effects’ and ‘Elite institutions and private schools’).

Work-related Class Differences

It is possible that non-economic and non-cultural resources and restrictions related to the different class positions of parents also have an impact on the educational attainment of the next generation. For instance, it has been assumed that working conditions foster different child-rearing practices which in turn shape children’s values about education (Kohn 1969; Kohn and Schooler 1983). Another possibility is that children come to value vocational education more if their parents have working class jobs, and that they set store by a general academic education if they are raised by a father and mother who themselves have intellectual occupations. In general, however, we believe that the transmission of interest affects which type of education a child chooses rather than what level he or she attains. All in all, little empirical evidence is available on these matters. From the studies that have been carried out, we tend to believe that the effect of such mechanisms is marginal.

Contextual Effects

Over and above the influences from the economic, cultural/educational, and social resources in the family of origin, the social surroundings of the student may affect educational decisions. Willms (1986) could demonstrate contextual effects on examination results in Scotland and Erikson (1994) found that the social context both in school and in the neighbourhood seemed to influence transitions to upper secondary school in Sweden. Thus, differences between nations in residential segregation as well as in the social homogeneity of schools could influence educational inequality.

Potentially, this could explain why Sweden has a fairly low degree of class inequality in educational outcomes; school segregation is probably less there than in many other countries. Due to a centralized resource distribution system and the virtual non-existence of private education, schools are of comparably equal standards. However, contextual effects may offset each other. Favourable socio-economic surroundings promote scholastic achievements in an absolute sense, at the same time as transition propensities, given achievement, are higher if the average educational performance in the school is poorer – what has been termed the “frog-pond” effect (Davis 1966). Anyway, contextual effects are small compared to the individual ones – in Sweden at the beginning of the 1990s, only five per cent of the variation in transitions to upper secondary education could be explained by school factors (Erikson 1994). Even if countries do differ in the degree of residential and school segregation, we do not believe that they could account for much of the difference in educational inequality.

The Institutional Structure of the Educational System

Economic, cultural, and other types of resources in the family of origin are of consequence for children’s educational careers; as we have argued, these resources influence costs for and benefits from schooling, as well as probabilities of succeeding. Family resources are converted into credentials in and by the educational system, and the institutional structure of this arena magnifies or attenuates the effect of social origin. Educational reformers have consequently for more than one hundred years looked to existing barriers in the educational system in attempts to increase school continuation among the disadvantaged social classes.

We believe five institutional factors to be important when analyzing transition propensities: the length of various branches of study; barriers and opportunities; the size of the system; the principles for transferring students from one level to the next; and the significance of elite institutions and schools financed by fees.

The first factor is straightforward: the more similar in length various branches of study are, the less important will be the costs of schooling for the choice between these branches. This will also affect school continuation decisions, especially at the first transition – as compulsory schooling has been prolonged, often subsumed the lower level of
secondary schooling, the opportunity costs of staying on have been lowered (cf. Chapter 5). This is more or less a universal phenomenon. In Sweden, compulsory schooling has been increased gradually, from six years in the 1930s to nine years in the 1990s (soon to become ten), at the same time as upper secondary and university education are of about the same length now as they used to be at the beginning of the century (though some tertiary study programmes are longer nowadays).

Below, we will discuss in more detail the other four factors we believe to be of weight. They include educational policies such as reforms aiming at removing barriers (or increasing opportunities), expanding the educational system, introducing meritocratic selection, and reducing the impact of private schooling. 39

School Reforms for Removing Barriers and Increasing Opportunities

The analyses in Chapter 2 suggest that the Swedish comprehensive school reform led to increased equality in educational participation in school forms beyond the compulsory. As equalization petered out in the 1970s, the introduction of comprehensive schooling must have had its equalizing impact during the early stages of the reform. Perhaps we can interpret this threshold effect to mean that the first hurdle to lower secondary school accounted for a certain amount of educational inequality. When this hurdle was removed, inequality decreased correspondingly, but after this shift it remained at that (lower) level. This is one of few studies to report that the equalization aim of a school reform has actually been achieved. 40 Several students of educational inequality have concluded that school reforms have probably had no effect on inequality, either because the authors did not find an equalization (Heath and Clifford 1990), or because the timing of the equalization seemed not to coincide with the introduction of reforms (De Graaf and Ganzeboom 1995; Jonsson and Mills 1993c; Jonsson 1993).

It is interesting to note that, for Sweden, empirical studies fail to find expected effects of several other school reforms. The educational reforms in the 1970s and 1980s (described in Chapter 1) at secondary and tertiary level, which led to the increasing availability of tertiary education, seem to have had no effect at all on educational inequality. This could suggest that it is the removal of a hurdle rather than the opening up of educational options that is crucial for reducing inequality or, perhaps more plausibly, that changes affecting conditions during the early school years have greater effects than those influencing higher levels of education.

Our conclusion must then be that only some types of reform, or reforms introduced under specific conditions, lead to greater equality. We believe that the crucial factor behind the equalization following the Swedish comprehensive school reform was the postponement of the earliest branching-points in school, that is, of the first consequential educational decision that a child is faced with. This conclusion is based on the hypothesis – and the result gives some support – that the influence of social background is stronger, the younger the child is at the first decision point, something that is often assumed, but seldom proven empirically. The decreasing association between social background and educational choice across transitions – a phenomenon which seems almost universal (Shavit and Belfield 1998) – partly follows from selection, that is, from decreasing unmeasured heterogeneity in the “risk set” (Mare 1993). However, the hypothesis of a decreasing effect of social background across ages receives support from three findings, apart from that of a reduction in inequality following the comprehensive school reform (Chapter 2). First, in an international comparative study of social selection and age at first transition, Hussen (1967) found a negative rank order correlation between the two variables. Second, Belfield and Shavit (1993) conclude that decreasing heterogeneity cannot fully account for the pattern of educational inequality across transitions, which implies support for the “life course hypothesis”, a result that is further supported by Mare (1993). The empirical support

39. What is taught in school (curriculum) may be important for the learning process, but we have so far not been able to find evidence that curriculum has different effects for children from different social backgrounds. How the curriculum is taught (pedagogy), and how the school evaluates knowledge and skills may have such effects, since pedagogy may be part of the “middle class culture of schools”, and both instruction and evaluation may be affected by teachers’ expectations. However, there is little agreement on the extent to which such “biases” exist, and, if so, what solutions there are to them. We believe that measures aiming at levelling such biases would anyhow be much less effective than other strategies discussed below.

40. Studies on the introduction of the comprehensive school in Scotland (McPherson and Willms 1987) and in Norway (Lindbekk 1993) also suggest some reduction in class inequality, though the statistical tests in these studies are not entirely appropriate for drawing such conclusions.

41. Of course, their effects might have been counteracted by other factors, but since class equalization in condition continued during the 1970s (though at a slower rate than before), this seems not particularly plausible.

42. When we exclude Finland, for which the reported results are incorrect, $r_{log}^2$ is around 0.90 for ten nations.
for this conclusion seems rather weak, however. Third, Hånnqvist (1994), and also Erikson and Jonsson (1993, Figure 7.2) show that, before any selection has occurred, the effect of social background is greater on the early choice of study alternatives than on the later choice of continued schooling. Individually, these results admittedly only provide weak support for the hypothesis, but together they make it more more credible than its alternatives. Thus, our conclusion is that social background effects are indeed stronger for younger children, though probably not by much (Erikson and Jonsson 1993, pp. 373–376).

What are the mechanisms behind the empirical fact that earlier decisions are more associated with social origin than are later decisions? In terms of Model (1), we might assume that all three factors contribute to this. Firstly, at early decision points there is still little actual information about a child’s abilities. In such a situation it is probable that higher class parents assume that the likelihood of success is higher than do lower class parents, partly because they feel confident that they can provide qualified help if needed (their educational resources are higher); partly, perhaps, because the best estimate of children’s academic abilities is based on the assumption that they are positively correlated with parents’ education. Secondly, as argued above, the apparent risks of social demotion connected with early school-leaving will tend to make perceived benefits from staying on at earlier transitions greater for children from higher social classes. Thirdly, for some early decisions which have consequences for future choices in that they imply a longer education and hence higher costs, economic circumstances may be decisive. However, as was argued above, and further in the conclusions, costs are not particularly important in Sweden for the earliest decision points.

The elimination of dead ends in the educational system may, moreover, lead to a reduction of educational inequality. Bright children from the lower classes, who have chosen a vocational track, will then have the opportunity to continue to university, if they have become more aware of their own potential and have perhaps changed their view on the benefits of higher education. As argued above, children from the higher classes will rarely enter dead ends, if such exist.

A school system without early decision points, where the first, socially most selective hurdle has been removed and which contains no educational dead ends, is thus likely to minimize the importance of social origin on educational attainment.43

In addition, the results in Chapter 2 suggest that an increase in the number of students receiving university grants or scholarships led to social class equalization at university level in Sweden. This effect was observed for the time period before the 1960s, when a universal study loan system replaced the means tested grant system. Thus, it seems that another type of educational reform that reduces the impact of class origin on tertiary education is one which brings about an equalization in economic resources between children from more and less affluent families. Such a reform, of course, plays the same role in reducing (marginal) costs as an equalization of income between social classes.

Educational Expansion

As argued by Hout and Dohan (Chapter 6 in this volume), in the U.S.A. an educational policy has been followed which may be regarded as an alternative strategy for equality to the one chosen in most European countries. This strategy can best be described as educational expansion and mass education in a system in which performance is not decisive for school continuation. The finding in Chapter 6 that the level of educational inequality is fairly similar in Sweden and the U.S.A. suggests that this educational policy may have counteracted the relatively high level of inequality of conditions prevailing in the U.S.A., and hence the importance of costs.

So why is this the case? Referring again to our basic model of educational choice, we may say that it is primarily due to very high probabilities of success in a system in which almost everyone is allowed to continue. If social class differences are great both in actual and perceived probabilities at decision points which the pupil encounters at low ages, as argued above, we would expect mass education at secondary level to be conducive to equality in participation.44 If it is easy to clear hurdles at early ages, class-biased selection may, as a consequence, grouping of pupils according to aspiration or performance—may equalize educational attainment and maximize freedom of choice at secondary and tertiary levels. Needless to say, there are several well-known problems associated with such a system—among other things, “going truly comprehensive” demands that a pedagogy based on individualized teaching methods is practiced, and that the performance of the most able pupils is not hampered.

44. There are other possible mechanisms as well. For example, if transition rates are almost 100 per cent for the most privileged social class, a ceiling effect will appear, in which case subsequent growth must lead to an equalization at that level. It may also be that benefits from making the first transition increase as the proportion of “drop-outs” declines, because the latter group will become more stigmatized and experience increasing problems, for example unemployment.
be reduced also at higher levels. What the Swedish comprehensive school reform actually led to, was a situation resembling the American strategy at secondary level. This did not occur for tertiary education, however, which (as is clear from Chapter 6) is still much more selective in Sweden.

There seems thus to be a strong case for educational expansion, and Hout and Dohau argue that this is indeed an alternative route to the Swedish one, where educational inequality seems to have been attenuated by reducing differences in living conditions in the population — a policy that may be effective, as we have seen, but which politicians will hardly try to achieve solely for that purpose. However, there are several reasons to be sceptical about the effectiveness of the expansion strategy. Firstly, in the analysis of the causes to the equalization in Sweden in Chapter 2, Erikson tests the importance of system expansion (measured as the proportion of a birth cohort continuing in school beyond the lower secondary level) for class inequality at university level, without finding the predicted effect.

Secondly, educational expansion has taken place in most countries, but few have experienced a concomitant equalization (Shavit and Blossfeld 1993; cf. Chapter 7 in this volume); and this is not least true of the U.S.A. (Hout, Raftery and Bell 1993; Chapter 6 in this volume). In their study of England and Wales, Halsey, Heath and Ridge (1980) actually suggest that expansion initially leads to increased inequality. As argued by Heath and Ridge (1983), the white collar classes may generally be quicker in taking advantage of reforms and increasing opportunities in society. However, in an attempt to study which social classes were the first to increase their educational participation when the system expanded in England and Sweden, Jonsson and Mills (1993b) did not find any support for this hypothesis; all social classes reacted very similarly to the expansion, or at least there was no clear pattern suggesting that, for instance, the working class lagged behind in the process.

The views of Shavit and Blossfeld, and of Heath and associates concerning the consequences of expansion for equality can be considered optimistic in that they imply that expansion eventually leads to lower class inequality. Naturally, this is true if higher classes reach transition probabilities close to one hundred per cent, and those who are more pessimistic argue that an equalization will occur only if this happens (Raftery and Hout 1993).

An interesting explanation for why class equalization may not follow on from the growth of the educational system, is that it is primarily girls from the more privileged social classes who benefit from the opening up of educational opportunities. As proposed by Shavit and Blossfeld in Chapter 7, class and gender equalization may be competing processes. An expanding tertiary sector, which selects students on the basis of previous performance or ability, is bound to meet women's increasing demand for higher education (since women's performance is at least on the same level as that of men). The system may not accommodate the increasing demand by lower class children, however, due to their on average poorer performance. Shavit and Blossfeld illustrate their hypothesis by using data for Sweden which do indeed suggest that middle class girls took advantage of the expansion of university education more than any other category defined by class origin and gender. Of course, it is hardly possible to test the assumption that working class children would otherwise have been admitted. That is to say, what we know is that middle class girls outnumbered working class children in the expansion, but not whether they won in a competition for a number of newly created positions. The alternative is that the system was only allowed to expand if academic excellence was upheld.

Thus, there are arguments both for and against the efficacy of educational expansion in the attempts to equalize educational outcomes between social classes, though the empirical evidence is more in line with a pessimistic stance. However, as shown in Chapter 1 below, under a numeros clausus system — that is, with restricted intake to higher levels of education based on previous performance — an expansion of the system would under certain conditions lead to an equalization. This is most apparent when there is a very high entrance requirement to a study programme (which in Sweden today is true of, for example, medical training, master of engineering courses, and those for business economists, and journalists at university level).

For the Commission, we were able to carry out some simulations of what consequences an expansion of university education would have for social class inequality (results not reported in this volume). By using data based on university applications containing information on individuals' grade point averages, and then linking information on social class background and actual enrolment to this data-set, we found that an expansion of the present system would result in a slight class equalization (Erikson and Jonsson 1993, Figure 8:8).

Though this points to expansion having a weak positive effect on
equality, there is also evidence to the contrary. As shown by the analyses in Chapter 1, class inequalities in the transition to upper secondary education would be lowest if only those who had a grade point average of more than 3.6 (slightly above the average) were admitted. If access to upper secondary school were restricted by a higher grade limit, inequalities would be greater, just as for university studies, which supports the conclusion that expansion may lead to less inequality in educational attainment. But inequalities would also be higher if the grade limit were lower. In the reformed Swedish secondary school, there is in practice no general restriction of access (though grade point requirements can be quite high for some branches of study) and class inequality is subsequently somewhat greater than would be the case if there were a more restrictive selection on the basis of performance. This is intuitively reasonable, since it is precisely the not-so-bright children born into higher classes — whose parents have educational resources and high aspirations for their progeny — who will benefit from an educational system without any barriers preventing pupils of low ability from continuing on to higher levels.

Our conclusion from these analyses is that educational expansion in general is a fairly blunt tool for equalizing educational outcomes between social classes. Its success seems to be conditional on four circumstances. Firstly, if expansion comes about through minimizing early self-selection, we can expect such an effect. This means that a school system in which crucial decision points are delayed generates less inequality, as argued above. Secondly, if expansion takes place through lowering very high entrance requirements in terms of earlier performance or ability tests, class inequalities may be reduced. Thirdly, if expansion at post-compulsory levels is attendant on the introduction or expansion of a grant or study loan system which favours students from less wealthy families, then we may predict that class barriers will be lowered. Fourthly, naturally, as participation rates at one level get close to one hundred per cent for the most advantaged group, class relativities will decrease at that level as the system grows.

**Meritocratic Selection or Freedom of Choice?**

An alternative strategy for educational equality, which could be pursued in a non-expanding system, is to make selection processes as “objective” as possible, for example by using standardized tests and examination results as a basis for selection to higher levels, or to prestigious courses.

The experience of England with regard to educational inequality may give some clues to the possible success of the strategy of meritocratic selection. Before the introduction of the comprehensive system in the early 1970s, a pupil had to succeed in public examinations and/or ability tests in order to continue on to an academic education. Consequently, the significance of good performance was higher and the leeway for parental choice was smaller than in, say, Sweden.  

From Chapters 4 and 5, as well as from earlier studies by Jonsson and Mills (1993bc), we learn that the degree of inequality of educational opportunity seems to be relatively low in Britain. Now, this is hardly what would be expected from our discussion above. Income inequality is not especially low in Britain, the economic security of the working class is hardly better than in most other industrial societies and pupils are separated into different tracks, or streams, at a fairly young age. The relatively low level of educational inequality in England supports the hypothesis that the more an educational system emphasizes selection on the basis of shown performance, rather than choice, the more equal may transition propensities in different classes be. Another fact that is in line with this hypothesis is, as mentioned above, that we estimate that the effect of educational choice accounts for about half the association between class of origin and educational attainment in Sweden (Erikson and Jonsson 1995).

Meritocratic selection is, however, not indisputably effective in reducing inequalities. For example, there is little support for the assumption that the introduction of ability tests (the 11+) in England after the 1944 Education Act led to an equalization (Halsey, Heath and Ridge 1980; Heath and Clifford 1990; Chapter 5 in this volume). Equally, and quite obviously, when admittance to higher educational levels is based entirely on some measure of proven ability, the choice not to continue will always be open. Meritocratic selection is therefore

45. Since the introduction of comprehensive schools is not yet complete in England, and since exams are still of greater importance than in Sweden, meritocratic selection is still more prevalent in England than in Sweden.

46. This is further supported by a study of Foulad and Halsey (1957). They investigated the distribution of grammar school places according to social origin and I.Q. in a local educational authority in England where the ability test (11+) was abandoned at the beginning of the 1950s. Their conclusions from studying before and after is that social origin increased in importance for grammar school attendance following the change towards a less formal selection process.

47. Though the possible absence of an effect may have been due to the share of free places at grammar schools before the 1944 Act, accomplished by the 1902 Educational Act and the 1907 free-place regulation (Halsey, Heath and Ridge 1980).
likely to be more effective at lower levels of schooling when school continuation is not associated with increasing costs. Nevertheless, to be given the opportunity to continue to higher levels of education in a system with a strong emphasis on selection may influence the transition propensities of children from lower classes more than those of children from higher; the former probably needs the encouragement more than the latter.

In sum, the form of selection of pupils to higher levels of education may well explain some part of the variation in educational inequality between countries, and perhaps also over time. The reformed school system in Sweden, however, puts much emphasis on free choice, in combination with teacher-assigned grade points (there are no examinations any longer), so this factor should contribute to making educational inequalities in Sweden relatively greater than in several other countries.

Elite Institutions and Private Schools

Most nations have a history of elite institutions at higher levels of education, mainly because such education generally was exclusive before W.W. II. In several nations, private schools supplemented the state sector schools, often charging high fees but giving high status and good job prospects in return. The importance of having been at, say, Eton or Winchester in England, or at one of the Ivy League schools in the U.S.A. may be extreme for high social positions, though it is difficult to tell whether this is due to selective intake or the real effects of skills taught by the school, or the status it confers upon students.

Elite schools may be described in terms of our individual-level model as representing high costs and high benefits (and, perhaps, also high probability of success because of high teacher to student ratio). In fact, the costs may often be so substantial that children from the lower classes have little chance of affording to go to such a school, introducing structural barriers to choices.48

Private schools were never significant in Sweden. From the 1930s onwards, the dramatic expansion of secondary and tertiary education took place almost exclusively in the state sector. It is very likely that the expansion in that way "dilutes" the prevailing, academic higher culture at upper secondary schools and universities, leading to a universal-
1994). In line with this hypothesis, decreasing benefits associated with higher education have also been suggested as an explanation for why the trend towards a reduction in educational inequality at university ended in Sweden at the beginning of the 1970s (Nilsson 1990).

The abovementioned assumption, expressed in the terms of our model (1), would mean that the benefits from higher education are more determined by expected economic returns for lower class students than for higher. This would follow if future salaries were equally valued by lower and higher class students, while other perceived benefits followed the broken curve of Figure 1. To us, though, it seems unclear why perceived economic returns should not follow the same broken curve, that is, an expected economic standard that is lower than the one in the parental home would seem to result in a greater loss in benefits than the improvement following from a corresponding inter-generational increase in economic conditions. In line with our arguments above, we accordingly have no faith in the assumption that economic returns are more important for lower class students than for those from higher classes.

Furthermore, in an attempt to test this hypothesis, we analysed the transition to more and less economically rewarding university programmes among children of various social origins (Erikson and Jonsson 1994b). If children from the lower classes more often chose branches of study that are on average more profitable in terms of future income, the hypothesis would receive support. It turns out, however, that it is children from the higher classes who have a greater propensity to "go for" these branches of study. This applies almost entirely, however, on the fact that their academic achievements are higher, and that very high grade point averages are sometimes required for admittance to courses leading to well-paid jobs (such as physician, or graduate engineer). Controlling for grade point averages at secondary level and taking expected costs of tertiary education — measured as the expected numbers of years of study — into consideration, we find no effect of parental education and only a slight, but still positive, effect of parental social class.

The third hypothesis about the effect of incentives on social class inequality in educational outcomes is more straightforward. It assumes that the "objective" value of making another educational transition differs between social classes; that is, not only are the costs of schooling lower, but also the actual benefits from it greater for children from higher social backgrounds, even at a given level of educational performance (cf. Chiswick 1988). Such an interaction may come about, for instance, if parents from higher classes are capable of using their social network in a particularly effective way if their children have attained the credentials that are often a minimum requirement for competing for the highest positions.

Thus, incentives would contribute to our understanding of the origin-education association if the benefits of educational transitions were in fact higher for higher social origins. In an analysis of this possibility (Jonsson 1995), it is found that there is indeed an interaction effect between origin, level of education, and outcomes (measured as the chance of reaching a social position in the upper service class), controlling for academic achievement and the costs of schooling. However, the result is the opposite of what was predicted above. Occupational chances are positively associated with social origins especially among those who leave school at a fairly low level. For those individuals coming from the most advantaged social circumstances, there are obviously alternative routes to occupational success, even if such mobility channels cannot, in the aggregate, compensate for the lack of educational credentials. Interestingly, however, at higher tertiary levels of education, there is virtually no difference between social classes. This means that the positive effects of attaining a degree "wipe out" the negative effects that humble origins otherwise bestow on children. As a corollary, the variation in chances of reaching a high social position connected to educational transition in fact attenuates the social...
selection in education in Sweden. This finding supports the hypothesis derived from the reproduction perspective, mentioned above, that higher social classes have greater access to alternative strategies for reaching occupational success than lower classes.

Is Education Getting More Important for Social Position and Labour Market Rewards?

Since incentives may have a bearing on the relation between social origin and educational attainment (either by strengthening it, or by making it weaker), it is useful to consider two questions: Firstly, is education getting more important for social positions and labour market rewards? Secondly, is the relative importance of education increasing as compared to other reproduction mechanisms?

For decades, a dominant hypothesis in sociology has been that education has gradually come to replace ascriptive factors as the basis for social selection and labour market rewards. As societies industrialize, and as rationality and universalism become key norms, achieved merit—notably in the form of educational credentials—will become the sine qua non for reaching higher social positions and for avoiding slipping into unskilled manual work, or unemployment (e.g. Parsons 1951; Treiman 1970; Bell 1973). In this process, the stratification order, it is claimed, will become more legitimate since it will be based on individuals’ own abilities and efforts (e.g. Blau and Duncan 1967; Bell 1973).

In Chapter 3 in this volume, Jonsson identifies four versions of the assumption that education has become more important for social position and labour market rewards, and tests them on Swedish data. He finds no general support for it. Some support is given by the finding that the occupational prestige of the parents has become somewhat less important for children’s prestige, relative to their own educational attainments. It is not possible to conclude unambiguously, however, that the predictive power of education for social position has increased during the last decades, and the association between educational credentials and income decreased substantially in Sweden between the late 1960s and early 1980s. In a survey of similar studies from a number of nations, Goldthorpe (Chapter 8 below), concludes that there is in fact little evidence in support of the assumption that formal merit has become more important over time in Western societies, though we should add that there are virtually no data that could be used to test whether such a change occurred at the onset of industrialization.

Is Social Stratification Based on Education Legitimate?

Thus, there is scant support for the popular hypothesis of the increasing importance of education in attainment processes. Consequently, there is little ground for claiming, along the lines suggested by Blau and Duncan, and Bell, among others, that the stratification order enjoys an increased legitimacy. In addition, the association between education on the one hand, and social attainment and rewards on the other, is far from perfect (cf. Kauze and Slomczynski 1985; Jonsson 1988; Chapter 3 in this volume). This indicates that factors other than formal educational qualifications are relevant for individuals’ position in society. This will come as no surprise to those acquainted with recent labour market theories, which maintain that appointment and promotion processes are more complex than a simple ‘recruitment by educational credential’ model would suggest. As argued by both Jonsson and Goldthorpe in this volume, employers often emphasize personal traits—such as orientation to work, or social skills—informed by industry, and workforce representatives (professional organizations and trade unions) often act in order to maximize the promotion chances of internal candidates, even if their educational credentials are poorer than those of external candidates. Drawing on the work of Hayek, Goldthorpe also concludes that market rewards are more reasonably conceived of as a function of “value added” by the individual, rather than determined by employers’ valuation of “merit”.

While educational credentials are far from being the only impor-

52. The pattern is identical for men and women. However, there is an additional interaction effect between sex, level of education, and occupational chances. It turns out that women, much like working class children, need university education to reach a high social position—at lower levels of education, including shorter tertiary studies, there is a marked sex difference. These two-three-way interaction effects are additive, meaning that women from the working class have far less chance of ending up in the highest social positions than men from the highest class, even when they have the same level of education and the same academic achievements.

53. Perhaps the most appropriate study of the ascription-to-achievement hypothesis is the one by Breen and Whelan (1993) in Ireland, since industrialization was so late in Ireland that fairly recent surveys include cohorts who experienced the transformation of an agrarian society. Breen and Whelan find no support for the hypothesis.
tant factor for economic life-chances, merit, even in a broader sense, does not necessarily constitute a legitimate ground for social stratification. Goldthorpe objects to the interpretation of the “meritocracy” as a just society in which rewards on the basis of merit are seen as deserved; there is, he claims, no way in which merit can be defined in a sufficiently “objective” way for it to be used as a basis of just social selection. In addition, desert is not the only criterion according to which resources may be distributed—needs and rights are alternative principles. We might add that it would seem especially unconvincing to argue that the distribution of social and economic goods on the basis of educational credentials is legitimate, given the existing association between social origin and educational attainment, even for children at the same level of ability and performance.

Variation over Time and Between Countries

Incentives for pursuing an educational career vary over time—as is evident from Chapter 3, economic incentives lessened in Sweden during the 1970s particularly. Incentives no doubt also vary between countries, and must presently be regarded as fairly weak for Sweden in an international perspective. The crucial question here, however, is whether variation in the consequences of education affect class inequalities in educational attainment. If so, we can assume that incentives (in addition to family resources and the institutional set-up of the educational system) account for inter-nation variation in this respect. We believe that this question cannot be answered on the basis of our present level of information, because of the possibly complicated interplay between the effects of incentives and of resources, that is, of push factors.

Generally we must assume that the smaller the differences in economic outcome between different types and levels of education—that is, the weaker the incentives—the lower will transition propensities be in all classes. The findings referred to above, namely that in a cross-sectional perspective children tend to choose between more and less “profitable” university programmes irrespective of their cultural or class origin, suggest that such a decline in overall transition rates will not give rise to changes in educational inequality. It is still possible, however, that the effects of cultural factors, associated with parents’ education, will in the long run be relatively little affected by the decreasing returns to education, if only because the propensity to value education as a consumer good may be slightly greater among those with parents with higher education; that is, the benefits may never approach zero for them. This would, in turn, cause educational inequality to increase with decreasing economic incentives, due to the association between social class and parental education.

But such a hypothetical tendency might be offset by the opposite response among students of higher social origins. While students with lower social origins have few alternatives to education if they want to improve their social position, upper middle class families may find it more advantageous to invest their resources in other career channels than education (such as finding first jobs with good career prospects). Thereby, the association between social background and educational transitions would become weaker.

The combined outcome of these possible, divergent effects can hardly be predicted, and may vary between countries. Moreover, that the actual benefits from higher education are larger for children from the lower classes, may be the case in Sweden but not in other nations. The conservative hypothesis must then be that, while we wait for more research in this area, we have to assume that varying incentives do not account for differences in educational inequality between nations.\(^\text{54}\)

CONCLUSIONS: EXPLAINING INTERNATIONAL VARIATION IN EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITY

In all industrial nations, educational attainment depends on class of origin. Moreover, the contours of this relationship are similar between nations. In this common landscape there are however some discernible characteristics. We have concluded that the distinguishable features of Sweden are a fairly substantial equalization, particularly in the period 1930–70, and a distribution of educational credentials that is at present relatively equal between social origins. It is likely that an equalization has occurred also in other countries—such as Germany and Holland—and that the level of educational inequality may be low in other countries as well, such as the U.S.A. Though firmer conclusions must await future research based on a larger number of nations and on

\(^{54}\) This assumption seems to be supported in an analysis on CASMIN data of the importance of educational credentials for mediating between class origins and class destinations. Ishida, Müller and Ridge (1995) conclude that there is little variation in the mediating role of education across the ten industrialized nations studied.
more reliable data sources, we find it plausible that Sweden is an outlier, with comparatively low educational inequality.

**Explaining Class and Country Differences in Educational Attainment**

In an attempt to explain Sweden's probable outlier status, we set out in this introductory chapter to formulate a general model of social class inequality in educational attainment, based, as much as possible, on empirical evidence given in this volume and in other studies of the Swedish Commission on Educational Inequality. In doing this, we have discussed different factors behind this phenomenon, and tried to delineate which of these vary most between countries and over time.

**Social Class Differences**

In summarizing, it may be helpful to take as a point of departure the two factors that structured our discussion above, namely educational performance and transition propensities. Class differences in these two respects account for approximately 50 percent of each of the association between class of origin and educational attainment in Sweden. The first factor is a set of mechanisms relating to the parent-child interaction and other childhood conditions which generate social class differences in academic ability and scholastic achievement measured by grades. Although such mechanisms are important, they are likely to be fairly similar between countries and stable over time.

The second factor is based on the finding that, at a given level of educational performance or academic ability, individuals make decisions about school continuation that are correlated with their social background. These correlations, we believe, may vary between nations and change over time. Why do people from different origins make different choices, then? Arguing that we should start from the assumption that individuals make rational (though often implicit) calculations, we constructed a simple individual-level model of educational decisions, including costs, benefits, and probability of success as determinants—all these factors may differ among social class origins. We then contended that it may be necessary to include terms meaning that not only the actual but also the perceived costs, benefits, and probabilities differ.55

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55. Note that such perceived factors are important for explaining variation among individuals, but that they may be uncorrelated with class origins.

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For instance, people from different social origins may have varying degrees of self-confidence in their capabilities, or the value they attach to a given educational outcome may be correlated with their social origin, thus "biasing" actual benefits.

Let us begin with asking how the three actual terms in the model vary with class of origin. Costs vary a lot because they depend on economic circumstances in the family of origin. Thus, economic factors are a strong candidate for explaining class inequality in educational transition. Though we have not been able to test it properly, we believe that economic resources are pertinent for the transition to university. However, empirical evidence suggests that economic factors are not so important for early school decisions, at least not in Sweden. Social origins seem to be at least as important for choice of stream or track in compulsory school—a choice which has no bearing at all on the cost of schooling—as for later decisions.

Turning to benefits, the results reported above suggest that, if anything, the benefits of making the transition to university are relatively high for children from lower social classes, since the benefits of entering the labor market after secondary school seem to be lower than for children of higher classes. In other words, higher education is necessary for lower class children because they lack alternative resources for "getting ahead"—such as the inheritance of capital or business, or a social network. This actually means that the higher costs for students from poorer origins are compensated for to some extent. It is not possible to estimate this countervailing tendency, but insofar as children from lower classes do recognize the necessity of formal credentials, it may be one reason why economic background does not seem to be all that important.56

Furthermore, if the average rate of discounting future rewards to present values differs between social classes, the ranking of educational alternatives according to utility may differ between them, even if the perception of costs, benefits and probabilities were exactly similar. It has been assumed that lower classes give less value to future rewards than higher ones (Rosen 1956), which would lead young people from the working class to assign a relatively high utility to taking a job rath-

56. One might ask whether the greater actual benefits from higher education reaped by children from more disadvantaged social backgrounds are known to them (otherwise these benefits will not affect the choice). We believe that they really are aware of this fact, in the sense that they realize how little help in occupational careers they can get by informal means, and, hence, how important formal credentials will be for them. (As discussed below, this is counter-balanced by other factors working to decrease their utility of higher education.)
er than continuing at school. We would, however, be reluctant to put much emphasis on this possibility. Before assuming differing tendencies to ‘defer gratification’, other factors must be controlled for. If, for instance, differences in costs for higher education are not taken into consideration, observed behaviour could easily, and erroneously, be ascribed to varying discount rates.

The third factor in the decision model, the actual probability of success, is likely to be the advantage of pupils with well-educated parents, at least at pre-university level (over and above the impact educational resources have on academic ability). There are two main reasons for this, we believe. First, these children can expect to receive much more help with their school work, such help being essential since out-of-school learning is also important for school success. This factor could very well explain why early educational decisions (even those which have no repercussions on costs) are correlated with origin, especially, as we have seen, with parents’ level of education. Particularly at lower levels of education, where it may be difficult to judge pupils’ academic abilities, well-educated parents will rely on their capacity to get their children through the more demanding streams, or tracks. This reliance seems on average to be correct. Despite the fact that children from the higher classes continue in school more often than other children when the educational performance is below average, there is no sign, even at higher levels of education, that poor performance “catches up” on children from higher classes, at least not at group level. Thus, insofar as the out-of-school learning potential is the reason why pupils with poor school records but well-educated parents still choose the most demanding tracks, such decisions must be regarded as rational.

The second reason why actual probabilities of success (especially as defined as a sequence of decisions) are higher for children with well-educated parents, is that they have superior knowledge about the school system. Parents who have themselves experienced higher education can give advice on behavioural strategies, what to study most intensively, and how to navigate their way through the array of choices facing pupils in school; particularly, they can identify alternatives that are likely to constrain later choices. It is not necessary for children to be aware of their parents’ competence in this respect (though they may feel confident in their parents’ support), since especially at earlier decision points parents are highly influential, or in fact even formally take the decisions.

A further mechanism of a factual character is the tendency towards risk aversion, which is directly based on preferences, though not included in our model. Those who are risk averse can be expected to avoid types of education where the cost is high and/or the risk of failure is great. A tendency towards greater risk aversion in lower classes would give rise to some educational inequality. Moreover, to the extent that the effects of risk aversion are asymmetrical, that is, that the tendency to avoid high costs among the risk averse is stronger than the tendency to be attracted by large benefits among risk takers, some degree of educational inequality would follow from the higher costs for lower class students, even if the distribution of risk aversion is the same in all social classes. Assume that students from different classes have the same probabilities of succeeding in a number of alternative educations and that the distribution of risk acceptance (R), that is, the highest risk the student is willing to take, is the same within each social class. All students have the same educational alternatives within their feasible sets and rank them in the same order according to utility. If alternatives that carry a risk above a certain limit (defined as \(C(1-P) > R\) in footnote 18 above) are avoided, highly ranked alternatives which carry large risks, will not be chosen by risk averse students. Given that costs are higher for lower class students (and probabilities of success on average lower) they may avoid alternatives chosen by students with the same tendency towards risk aversion but from higher classes. This suggests that the high costs for students from the working class have an effect on educational choice over and above their direct effect on the utility ranking. We believe that differences in risk aversion between social classes are not great enough for the direct effects on educational inequality to be of importance, while indirect effects, via costs, could account for some part of the association between social origins and educational attainment.

We think that the individual decision model, based on the actual conditions regarding costs, benefits and the probability of success, is in line with the bulk of the empirical evidence, and it is in principle sufficient to explain class differences in educational transition, perhaps together with the indirect effects of risk aversion. In practice, however, there are some findings that remain to be explained, and we think it is necessary to adjust the model accordingly, by also incorporating perceived factors.

Firstly, we find that class origin, after controlling for parents’ education, has a fairly strong effect on the first educational choice in compulsory school (where we argued that costs are insignificant). The most important factor missing is, we believe, class differences in aspiration, which could be conceived of as an interaction between social class and the perceived benefits of certain educational transitions. In particular, we think that social origin has a direct effect on aspiration levels, along the lines suggested by Keller and Zavalloni, and Boudon (Figure
In order for their children to avoid social demotion, parents from higher classes do all they can to keep the door to higher education open as long as possible; and they will give up only when persuaded by a clearly demonstrated lack of ability or interest on the part of their children. We should note that even if we define this mechanism as being a function of perceived rather than actual benefits, we do not invoke an explanation that requires people to have a "distorted view" of "true" benefits. In fact, it is very likely that the underlying value—that downward social mobility will impose a negative weight on a given level of benefits which is higher than the corresponding positive weight associated with social advancement—is shared by all social groups in industrial societies.

Secondly, available evidence suggests that class differences in educational choice are age-dependent, in that they are (somewhat) stronger the younger the pupil is at the time of decision. We believe that the desire of the higher classes to maximize their progeny's educational opportunities in order to avoid social demotion is similar at the first two decision points, at least (because these decisions are associated with social positions that are below the crucial point where the utility function levels off for higher classes). Thus, decreasing class differences in perceived benefits are unlikely to explain the age-dependence, and costs, as argued above, seem to be of only minor importance at the first decision points. This implies that differences between social classes in the perceived probability of success in higher forms of education is greater the younger the child is. Furthermore, the older the child is, the more will the decision be taken by him or her personally, and the utility estimates of children of the same ability but from different social classes, may be closer to each other than those of their parents.

We can see two possible mechanisms behind this self-selection, both based on the fact that parents who have higher schooling themselves have, as noted above, access to more accurate information about educational decisions. Prima, they know that the level of ability needed for success is quite limited. They have probably seen a number of mediocre talents make their way through the educational system. Secundo, lower class parents may be less able to judge their offspring's true potential for higher education. They do not dare to believe that their child is sufficiently able to succeed in the more demanding tracks until strong indications for this are at hand; persistent reports on good performance or extreme academic aptitude may be needed to convince them. Though we think that most of the class inequalities in educational outcomes can be explained without recourse to mechanisms implying that some group has a distorted view of reality, we believe that perceived probabilities of success at lower levels of education do vary among social groups.

In conclusion, then, we believe that class inequalities in educational outcomes can be explained by five mechanisms:

- Academic performance is better among children from higher social classes.
- Actual educational costs are higher for lower classes, primarily affecting transitions to tertiary education.
- Actual probabilities of success (at a given level of school achievement) are higher, the higher the parents' education, at least at primary and secondary level, because parents teach their children school-related skills and know how to navigate the educational system.
- Perceived benefits of education are greater for children from higher classes, because the negative value they place on social demotion outweighs the positive value of the corresponding social ascent for children from lower classes.
- Perceived probabilities of success are lower for children from lower classes at the earliest educational choice.

Which of these mechanisms is the most important? For educational attainment generally, the single most important is the first, though, admittedly, this is more of an empirical statement than an explanation. Since we anyway expect social class differences in ability and educational performance to be fairly stable over time and across countries, the most important question for us here is which of the latter four mechanisms is the most salient for educational decisions. The available evidence falls short of answering this question, though our own hypothesis is: 1) For the earliest decision, perceived benefits and probabilities of success—both actual and perceived—are the most important for class inequalities; 2) At intermediate levels of education, such as the upper secondary school, perceived benefits are most significant, but costs and probabilities of success also influence transition propensities; 3) At higher levels, costs are most important, but perceived benefits and probabilities also make a difference.

It must be emphasized that though we have sought to base our conclusions on a general model of educational choice, our conclusions here are primarily drawn from evidence for Sweden, stemming from the early 1990s. It is clearly possible, for example, that costs are also crucial at lower levels of education in other nations, or that perceived
probabilities of success might be less important for class inequalities in educational systems with a more meritocratic selection. We now turn to the question of what factors make Sweden a probable outlier when it comes to educational inequality.

Differences Between Nations

Before outlining the typical Swedish features of class inequality in educational outcomes, let us ask what mechanisms behind this phenomenon can be assumed to vary generally (over time and between nations). The answer, as we see it, is that only actual educational costs and the perceived probability of success at the earliest branching point clearly vary. In addition, variation between nations in the relative emphasis put on achievement versus choice for educational transitions, and in the numerical importance of elite schools, presumably affects the association between origin and educational outcome. Other sources of variation in this link no doubt exist, but are probably of minor importance for explaining differences between nations.

So, in what way do the four factors singled out vary? Costs vary according to social class differences in income, wealth and economic security, as well as to the length of different educational alternatives, the direct and indirect costs of schooling, and the conditions under which students get loans and subsidies for covering costs during their studies.

The importance of the perceived probability of success when early educational decisions have to be made is partly dependent on the institutional set-up of the school system. In a system in which early self-selection is constrained by the choice structure, educational inequality will be less than in a system where consequential decisions about the educational career are taken at a very young age.

Increasing selection based on previous performance or ability is another way of reducing educational inequality, by eliminating at least a part of the effects of class differences in probability of success and perceived benefits at early decision points. We consider this to be an alternative route because meritocratic selection is presumably more effective at lower levels of education, at which point increasing overall transition propensities would have the same effect.57

We suggest that Sweden’s probable outlier status depends mainly on relatively low costs and no early selection. The lack of elite institutions may have an additional effect, since, because of very high costs, they will only be considered as alternatives by children from the upper classes. The direct costs of schooling are low in Sweden, inequality of living conditions relatively small, and economic security (at least up till the mid 1990s) high. Moreover, the comprehensive school reform postponed the earliest branching point, while the expansion of secondary education reduced further the effect of early self-selection. Nevertheless, there are still echoes of the old system within the reformed one, magnifying inequalities, and the great emphasis put on choice has the same effect. Thus, in Sweden, like in other nations, there is plenty of room for further equalization.

Even as we single out two principal and two auxiliary factors for explaining variation between nations, we must acknowledge that the other factors we have identified as important for educational inequality may all account for the high degree of commonality among industrialized nations, as well as for stability over time. These include a set of mechanisms relating to parent-child interaction and other childhood conditions which generate social class differences in educational performance. The actual probability of success, also given educational performance, is for similar reasons, though often overlooked generally higher for children of well-educated parents. Equally, the direct effect of social position on aspirational level must be assumed to promote similarity between nations. All in all, we would not object to the interpretation that most of the factors we have discussed actually contribute to stability over time and similarity between nations.

Finally, we should note that we have, in this concluding section, painted a stylized picture of class inequality in educational attainment, a picture that is furthermore only partly based on empirical findings. By concentrating on the mechanisms we consider to be the most salient one by one, we have ignored one possible explanation for the Swedish deviation, namely that it depends on a combination of several factors, which act more in concert in Sweden than in other industrial nations.

57. We would not ourselves hesitate to choose system growth before increased selection, even if based on “objective” standards. This is because the stress connected with examinations and ability tests has negative effects on pupils. Decisions based on tests and exams entail a fairly high degree of individual injustice since they are inevitably imperfect. Equally, curbing the aspiration to learn among students is per se a bad thing.
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