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Research shows that social background is a key factor in determining access and participation in education; students from advantaged backgrounds have higher achievement levels than student from disadvantaged backgrounds (Campbell, 2007; Eriksen, Goldthorpe, Jackson, Yaish & Cox, 2005). The authors argue that there are many factors that contribute to inequality of educational opportunity such as interactions between the resources and aspirations of students and their families and the institutional features of an educational system. Inequalities between students (and their families) in the economic, social, and cultural resources available, that is, inequality of condition, may be exacerbated or

counteracted by the structure of educational institutions’ (p. 308). This book builds on existing research by addressing the roles of two significant processes; performance and choice. The authors suggest that students from “disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely not just to perform well but also to proceed to higher levels of education even when they do perform well.” The key assertion is that when students from disadvantaged backgrounds perform well, it is the choices that are made at significant transition points that can inevitably limit their future prospects. As such, the authors argue that interventions that are implemented in order to reduce inequality should not only be focused on performance, but should also be targeted towards the decision-making processes at the point of educational transitions. Inequality in education opportunity is considered as ‘a consequence of both social-background differences in academic performance and social-background differences in the choices that students make, holding performance constant’ (p.2).

The book presents the findings based on research focusing on inequality in educational opportunity conducted in eight Western countries: Denmark, England, France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United States. The chapters are organised by starting with highly stratified and selective systems, such as Germany, and ending with systems exhibiting weak stratification and selectivity, such as the United States. In highly stratified systems, students are tracked early on in their academic careers resulting in limited mobility into other streams. Low stratification provides more autonomy for students in exercising free choice when considering educational opportunities. The ‘primary effects are seen to be the effects of social background on performance and secondary effects are seen to be the effects of social background on educational choices, conditional on performance (p. 8). Building on existing research, a common methodology is utilised to measure the impact of primary and secondary effects on inequality in educational opportunity. This takes into consideration the factors associated with social background, academic performance, and transitions.

The first two chapters offer comprehensive definitions for the key factors associated with primary and secondary
Chapter 3, ‘Inequality in transitions to secondary school and tertiary education in Germany,’ by Martin Neugebauer, David Reimer, Steffen Schindler and Volker Stocké begins by stating that ‘one of the most stable findings in educational research is that, on average, students of low socioeconomic origin choose less ambitious educational pathways than their peers from more privileged backgrounds’ (p. 56). This study provides the context for education in Germany within a highly stratified and highly selective system. The focus in this chapter is on the transition from elementary school to high school at the age of 10-11 into one of several secondary school tracks. The decision making process at this stage has significant consequences for future educational and career opportunities. The second transition stage that is addressed is at the tertiary level when student between the ages of 18-22 have obtained a university entrance qualification. Future career prospect are dependent on the secondary school type, from Hauptschule, the least academically demanding to Gymnasium, the academically oriented track. The authors highlight the importance of primary and secondary effects at these significant transitions. The chapter concludes with possible interventions for reducing primary and secondary effects in order to tackle inequity of educational opportunity in Germany. Withholding tracking of students until they are older is suggested as a low-cost measure for increasing opportunities for student from disadvantaged backgrounds. Finally, the authors identify the cost of going to university as a limiting factor when there exist the low-risk and ‘attractive’ alternative of vocational training programs. In the author’s opinion, the secondary effects are significant in determining the choices made at the transition level after secondary school.

Chapter 4, “How social background affects educational attainment over time in the Netherlands,” by Charlotte Büchner and Rolf van der Velden focuses on the school system in the Netherlands, which is classified as being highly stratified and selective. The first transition occurs at age 12, when students are divided into a vocational or academic oriented track. The students are selected for the various tracks depending on test performance and teacher
recommendation. Secondary effects do have a role in that teachers make recommendations based on their judgement about student motivation and future expected success. There is also an opportunity for parents to negotiate placement of students in higher tracks. The second significant transition that is addressed is when students are at the age of 17-18. University and vocational college entrance is based on nationwide and school-based examinations. This study compares student performance and the educational background of their parents in order to measure primary and secondary effects.

Chapter 5, ‘Academic achievement, tracking decisions and their relative contribution to educational equalities,’ by Mathieu Ichou and Louis André Vallet provides a comprehensive overview spanning four decades in France. This chapter begins with a brief history of the educational pathways available to students in two cohorts; students born in 1951 and 1984. The data set consists of over 17,000 participants for each cohort. For the 1984 cohort, and still relevant to today, the first major transition into different tracks occurs at the upper secondary stage of school when students are at age 15. The three tracks are vocational, technological and academic. The 1951 cohort experienced their first major transition at age 11. The comparison between the two cohorts is useful in determining primary and secondary effects. A strength of this research is the analysis of variables and the focus on class and education, with references to gender and ethnic equalities.

Chapter 6, “Social-origin inequalities in educational careers in Italy” by Dalit Contini and Andres Scagni begins by highlighting low average educational attainment, subsequent low enrolments in tertiary education and limited intergenerational educational mobility when comparing Italy with other European countries. The analysis shows that social background has a significant impact on educational opportunities in Italy. Furthermore, the results show that this is largely attributed to secondary effects. I would like to highlight the response to addressing inequalities through the introduction of standardized testing to evaluate the system, promote competition between schools and to increase accountability. This approach can have a constraining impact on the curriculum if ‘authority’ is afforded to the
test. It is essential any standardized test is well-aligned to the goals of the schooling system and the curriculum.

Chapter 7, “Ever-declining inequalities? Transitions to upper secondary and tertiary education in Sweden, 1972-1990 birth cohorts,” by Frida Rudolphi. This chapter demonstrates that the impact of reducing secondary effects has resulted in a decline in inequality in educational opportunity. The impact of primary effects are shown to inevitably impact on social inequalities. Students from advantaged backgrounds will perform better than students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The author asserts that social inequality is visible through differences in performance and future educational policy must be directed at reducing educational differences.

Chapter 8, “Dentist, Driver, or Dropout? Family background and secondary education choices in Denmark,” by Anders Holm and Mads Meier Jæger. This study focuses on the first significant transition into different tracks after elementary school in Denmark. The choices made at this stage are to enter upper secondary (academic), vocational secondary or to leave the system. After completing upper secondary, further choices are available into university or university college (for courses such as nursing and teaching). Comparing two cohorts; 1970 and 1984, it was found that primary and secondary effects have remained stable over time. The results showed that secondary effects have a significant impact on educational outcomes in Denmark, particularly when compared to other countries.

Chapter 9, “Social background and educational transitions in England,” by Michelle Jackson. The author states that research about inequality in the English system shows that it is ‘considerable and significant’. By focusing on parental class and parental education, a careful examination of the factors impacting on educational opportunity at the transition from compulsory education (16 years) to post-compulsory options is provided.

Chapter 10, “Class origins, high school graduation, and college entry in the United States” by Stephen L. Morgan, Michael W. Spiller and Jennifer J. Todd. A concise summary of the education system in the US and the research associated with primary and secondary effects
provides the context and sound foundation for the analysis that follows. The authors justify the use of this research in the development of policy and interventions that equalize educational opportunities.

Chapter 11 offers a comprehensive analysis of the research across the eight countries and the implications of systemic structures that exacerbate inequality. While a very brief summary of each chapter has been provided here, the authors provide a thorough insight into each respective education system and the educational barriers and opportunities available to students at various stages.

Overall, this book provides a significant contribution in developing understanding about inequality in educational opportunity and the importance of addressing secondary effects as a key factor. One of its strengths is the use of a standardized methodology and the comprehensive data sets that support the cases presented. These international studies expand the opportunities for drawing comparisons across time and place. It is evident that in different schooling systems, the authority afforded to different stakeholders has significant implications for future educational opportunities and career prospects. This collection provides an insight into the nature of different education systems, the groups that are being affected and the intended and unintended consequences of transition policies and subsequent decision-making in each country.

The research shows the impact of primary and secondary effects and provides possible avenues for reducing the impact on educational inequity – there is much work to be done here and it is an important aspect of the research agenda. It is interesting to note the different strategies proposed for reducing inequity based on the context of each education system. While the issues identified are not new, they are as relevant as ever in the global context and in some cases, have persisted over long periods of time. Considering the issues through the lens of performance and choice provides an opportunity for targeting interventions in order to work towards equalizing educational inequalities. In conclusion, I highly recommend *Determined to Succeed: Performance Versus Choice in Educational Attainment* for the significant contribution it makes to research focusing on inequalities in educational opportunity.
References


About the Reviewer

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