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School curricula matter for the transmission of social advantage

New research by the ESRC-funded Applied Quantitative Methods Network (AQMeN) shows that curriculum differences in secondary schools contribute to reproducing social inequalities. The link between the curriculum studied at school and the attainment of social status several decades after leaving school has never been demonstrated before.

Dr Cristina Iannelli, senior lecturer in the Moray House School of Education at the University of Edinburgh analysed the role of curricula and school types in social mobility and the extent to which these institutional differences can explain the transmission of social advantage and disadvantage in the labour market.

Attendance at grammar and independent schools was found to explain only a small proportion of the social inequalities in entering the top social classes. When analysing outcomes at age 33, about 8% of the advantage transmitted by a middle-class parent and 16% by a highly-educated parent was linked to the school type attended by their children. However, a larger portion of this effect was explained by curriculum studied. Thus, curricula accounted for 23% and 29% of the advantage associated with having a parent from top social classes or a highly-educated parent respectively.

People from more advantaged social backgrounds were more likely to study a larger number of courses in subjects such as languages, English, maths and science (and to attend selective schools) which were found to enhance the chances of entering professional and managerial occupations and avoiding unskilled jobs. Taken together curricula and school types accounted for between a quarter and a third of the advantage associated with growing up in a middle class family.

The positive effect of studying languages, English, maths and science persisted even when analysing occupational destinations at age 42 while the effect of having attended different school types was found to diminish over the occupational career.

Data from the National Child Development Study were used to analyse the occupational outcomes at three time points of individuals' lives, at age 23, 33 and 42. The people in the study were in secondary school between 1969 and 1976 at the time of transition from a selective to a comprehensive system and were in the labour market between the end of the 1970s and the year 2000. The choice of this particular cohort allowed the researcher to study the long-term effects of curriculum by analysing mature occupational destinations.

Ranked among the top universities in the world

Dr Cristina Iannelli, said: “In the British education systems subject choices were and are still crucial for gaining access to prestigious universities and for entering professional jobs. This study uncovers subject choice as one of the mechanisms by which middle-class parents were able to put their children onto the right path leading to the top occupational destinations”. Another finding also showed that ‘school curriculum’ explained the effect of attending grammar and independent schools that could not be explained by the social composition and ability of the students attending these schools.

Dr Iannelli added: “We should not overlook the importance of subject choices in secondary school for creating opportunities for social mobility. Policies oriented to increase the number of pupils from less advantaged social backgrounds having access to and being encouraged to take up core subjects such as languages, English, maths and science might help to reduce inequalities in education and the labour market ”.

The findings of this study have been published this September in the *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, in the special issue: Education and Social Mobility.

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The Applied Quantitative Methods Network is an ESRC-funded Research Centre that aims to develop a dynamic and pioneering set of projects to improve the understanding of current social issues in the UK and provide policy makers and practitioners with the robust independent research-based evidence to build a better future.