

## PREFACE

In many countries, concern about social-background inequalities in educational attainment has focused on inequalities in test scores and grades, with interventions including early-childhood education and low-cost child care being proposed as necessary to reduce such inequalities. The presumption behind these increasingly widespread interventions is that the best way to reduce inequalities in educational *outcomes* is to reduce inequalities in *performance*. But is this presumption correct? Is it possible that children 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? Is part of the problem, in other words, the choices that these children are making? If it is, might it be more appropriate to focus on interventions that address such choices rather than those that focus solely on performance? The purpose of this book is to take on just such questions and to offer the first comprehensive cross-national examination of the roles of performance and choice in generating social-background inequalities in educational attainment.

This volume combines detailed analysis of educational transitions in different countries with general commentary on the roles of performance and choice in creating educational inequality. At the heart of the volume is a methodological approach that allows us to quantitatively assess the contributions of performance and choice. This approach is explained and developed early on in the volume and then applied throughout the balance of the book. The analyses based on this method are not of purely academic interest. By considering educational inequalities as the overall consequence of two separate processes (performance and choice), we do of course gain

greater theoretical and empirical precision. But the policy implications are also clear and dramatic. The results presented here and in a web appendix (<http://www.primaryandsecondaryeffects.com>) allow us to begin developing an empirical foundation for choosing between interventions oriented toward performance and those oriented toward choice.

As do several other volumes in this field (e.g., Shavit and Blossfeld 1993; Shavit, Arum, and Gamoran 2007), this volume represents a collaborative approach to cross-national comparative research, with authors from European societies and the United States cooperating to produce comparable analyses across a range of institutional contexts. This cross-national cooperation came about through support from the European Union's Framework 6 Network of Excellence, EQUALSOC (Economic Change, Quality of Life, and Social Cohesion), a collaboration among research centers across Europe. The network is distinctive for its unwavering support of junior scholars and its willingness to fund projects over the long period necessary for cross-national collaborations to come to fruition. EQUALSOC provided funding for project meetings, research assistance, and conferences and meetings across Europe. This volume (alongside numerous other research papers) is the outcome of the collaborations fostered by the network. It is seemingly fashionable in the current political climate for British citizens to hold negative views of the EU, but it is hard to imagine a more effective and productive European-wide social science collaboration than that funded under EQUALSOC.

I suspect that few would recommend book editing as a way to make friends, given the cajoling and the issuing of (occasionally unreasonable) demands that accompany the role. But I am fortunate indeed that the authors in this volume were so committed to the project that they submitted to such cajoling with enthusiasm and good humor. In addition to the detailed comments and suggestions issued at project meetings, each draft chapter was subjected to careful, sustained, and insightful review by the other contributors. This is collegiality at its best. I am very grateful to have been part of such an exceptional group, and I thank all of the authors for their contributions to the project.

The wider scholarly community also contributed to this volume. Papers from the project were presented at many workshops and conferences, and particularly those of the EDUC (Education, Social Mobility and Social

Cohesion) group within the EQUALSOC network. Within EQUALSOC, I should like to particularly acknowledge Robert Erikson, John Goldthorpe, Jan O. Jonsson, Walter Müller, and Yossi Shavit, who offered perceptive comments, constructive suggestions, and calm counsel. Valuable contributions to the project also came from the twice-yearly meetings of the Research Committee on Social Stratification (RC28) of the International Sociological Association. The committee offers a welcoming and stimulating intellectual environment for those concerned with issues of social stratification and inequality, and many of the chapters in this volume have benefited greatly from the contributions of RC28 participants. The editors and reviewers of the *Studies in Social Inequality* series of Stanford University Press offered extremely helpful and constructive advice on revisions to the volume, and I particularly thank Kate Wahl for her thoughtful contributions to the project.

While preparing this volume, I was fortunate to be a part of academic communities on both sides of the ocean. I started the volume at Nuffield College and at the Centre for Research Methods in the Social Sciences at Oxford University, and I finished it at the Center on Poverty and Inequality and the Institute for Research in the Social Sciences at Stanford University. I am extremely grateful to the Center on Poverty and Inequality for its support of the project in recent years. I thank colleagues and friends associated with these institutions, many of whom offered constructive criticism and helpful suggestions on the project. While a great many individual scholars offered valuable comments and suggestions, I would particularly like to thank Richard Breen, David Cox, Geoffrey Evans, and Colin Mills. Their unwavering enthusiasm for the project and reassuring words are much appreciated.

Those who work on social stratification and the intergenerational transmission of inequality will perhaps be unsurprised to learn that the editor of a volume on educational inequality was borne of a family of schoolteachers. I thank my parents for their support and for illuminating discussions about educational inequalities as experienced by those attempting to tackle them head-on. I also appreciate the support of my two dear sisters, Catherine Rose and Alexandra Wall; my grandmother, Eva Jackson; and other family and friends. And finally, I wish to thank David Grusky. He is very special.