

NEW STUDY: MONEY MAKES THE GRADE—STILL

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Last month, a report emerged from the London School of Economics and the University of Surrey, commissioned by the Sutton Trust research foundation. It had the unexciting title *Recent Changes in Intergenerational Mobility in the UK*.

This report is rich in implications because of the corollary focus that the authors brought to bear on the relationship between social class and educational achievement.

The main social finding of the report is that in the second half of the last century, an initial decline in intergenerational socio-economic mobility was followed by a stagnation of class structure. In other words, a twelve-year cycle (1958-1970) in which the number of individuals who moved up (or down) the social ladder decreased, thereby strengthening the dominance of the upper class, has been, not reversed, but arrested, so that those who were up in 1970 were still up at the end of the century, and those who were down in 1970 stayed down through the end of the century. Therefore, the widened gap between rich and poor of the sixties became at least a semi-permanent feature of British social structure.

The report finds a similar pattern in our country: "The research also found that social mobility in the UK and the US was lower than all other advanced nations for which there was comparable data during this period."

I am not an economist, but what the researchers determined to be the impact of this social datum on educational achievement brings it within my principal métier.

The report's major findings on mobility in educational achievement supplement its findings on mobility in social class:

Those from the poorest fifth of households but in the brightest group at age three drop from the 88th percentile on cognitive tests at age three to the 65th percentile at age five. Those from the richest households who are least able at age three move up from the 15th percentile to the 45th percentile by age five.

If this trend were to continue, the children from affluent backgrounds who are doing poorly at age three would be likely to overtake the poorer but initially bright children in test scores by age seven.

The upshot of these findings is that socialization trumps innate ability (whatever that may be) when it comes to making educational progress.

In practical terms, this means that if you take two three-year-olds, a rich academically weak one and a poor academically strong one, by the time that they start school, the gap between the two will have narrowed substantially as the rich one improves academically and the poor one deteriorates academically. By the time that they reach the third grade, the rich child will have passed the poor child as the former's upward progress crisscrosses the latter's downward regress.

In addition, although this report does not take it that far, if one extrapolates from there, by the time that they reach high school, they will have changed places academically, and the rich child will perform as well academically at that level as the poor child had done as a toddler, and the gap between them will be as wide as it was at age three, but they will now be at opposite ends of the educational seesaw. This constitutes our insidious version of Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper*.

There is a behavioral corollary to this that the research also discovered: "a stark divide exists in the behavioural traits of children from low income compared with those from high income parents [using] indicators of externalizing behaviour (fighting, disobedience, temper tantrums, etc.) to form an index of bad behaviour."

Although the authors do not draw any sweeping causal conclusions, the statistical correlations are so strong that they can say with some certainty, "parental background continues to exert a very significant influence on the academic progress of children."

This is sadly true, but only in a sense. If the authors had drawn their conclusions more broadly, they would have been closer to the full extent of the dilemma.

"Parental background" is only one—granted, a very powerful one—of the components of the complex network that constitutes socio-economic milieu. Socio-economic origin should not be destiny, but we have allowed ourselves to devolve into a country where it looks as though it is.

Our version of the "separate but equal" (that in practice means unequal) is "different but equal" (that in practice has exacerbated cognitive inequality even more than ethnic segregation did).

We need to clean our legislative, educational, and domestic houses. We need to do it now. We need legislators, educators, and parents to unite in demanding the same uniform high standards of academic achievement and behavior for all young people. If that happens, we could reach a point where most of our students eschew the arc of the academically strong poor child and actively realize the arc of the academically weak rich child. In short, we could produce an average student who is more prince than pauper.

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