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Woessmann, Ludger and Peterson, Paul E. (2007). *Schools and the Equal Opportunity Problem*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

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Reviewed by Noga Admon
University of Iowa

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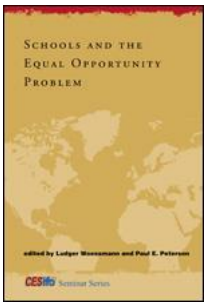
Schools and the Equal Opportunity Problem demonstrates the inconclusive, often contradictory nature of educational policy research. The book, a collection of papers presented at the 2004 CESifo conference in Munich, looks at a longstanding theme in educational research: what policies are in place to promote equal opportunity in different countries, and have they been successful? By extension, it is asking – why have our policies been failing for so long in creating equal educational opportunity?



The book is composed of sub-sections addressing the problem, then some of the latest research in the field, and finally educational policies designed to promote equal opportunity. Laying the rationale for this structure is the introduction (chapter 1), in which the editors present a well-written review of the major developments in educational research during the second half of the 20th century, with a special focus on James Coleman's work in the United States. The two papers following the introduction in the "Problem" section focus on the expansion of higher education in Britain (Machin, chapter 2) and on economic returns to education in Sweden (Sandgren, chapter 3) – two interesting papers, though not obvious choices for portraying the problem of equal educational opportunity. At this point, the reader may expect the book to follow the themes of higher education and economic returns to education, but the remainder of the book focuses exclusively on K-12. The editors may have intended to point at the greater social ramifications of educational inequality before narrowing the discussion to the K-12 level, but by doing so, they created a disconnect between the presentation of the problem and the presentation of solutions and policies.

Ludger Woessmann

In the second section, three studies on the topic of peer group are presented. The editors put together papers on school peer characteristics, school selectivity and tracking – an uncommon category which seems to work well in this case, even as it does not result in a coherent conclusion. In the first paper, Vigdor and Nechyba dismiss peer effects in North Carolina schools (chapter 4), showing that no causality can be proven in the case of peer effects on students' educational outcomes. In the second paper, Galindo-Rueda and Vignoles show higher educational outcomes, but also a more unequal distribution of educational outcomes, for a selective school system in England and Wales compared to a mixed-ability school system (chapter 5). In the third paper, researchers Brunello, Giannini and Ariga calculate the optimal time for tracking in German schools (chapter 6).

The three papers leave the reader confused. Of the three, one dismisses the evidence for peer group effect, and two confirm it. Consequently, The question posed by the editors in the title of this section – "Change the peer group?" – is left unanswered. In addition, there seems to be a missed opportunity – mainly in chapter 5 - to elevate the discussion and address the tension between the excellence movement and the goal of educational equality. How should policy makers concerned with equal opportunity make sense of the findings presented in this section?

Paul E. Peterson

The third section, titled "Refocus resources?", opens with Hanushek's study in which he concludes that teacher quality and peer group composition have a substantial impact on the Black-White achievement gap in Texas schools (chapter 7), more so than other policies which focus on school resources. Likewise, the two papers which complete the section conclude that resource equalization alone is not the solution for the equal opportunity problem: Dutch researchers Leuven and Oosterbeek report that only a universal pre-school program can promote equal opportunity (chapter 8), and US researchers Betts and Roemer report that a feasible spending equalization policy will not result in educational equality (chapter 9).

Unlike the prior section of the book, this section is very clear in its message – the answer to the question ("refocus resources?") is an unmistakable No. This should not come as a surprise, given that educational researchers have been looking at school resources since the first Coleman Report, and have repeatedly found that school resources cannot explain educational inequality (as Woessmann and Peterson mention in the introduction). These recent studies are of a greater interest, then, in revealing what *does* make a difference, than in discovering what does not. Hanushek's findings shed a new light on the topic of the previous section – peer group effects; and Leuven and Oosterbeek's findings could have fit well under the next section of the book.

In "Solutions or Aggravations? Standards and Choice," the last section of the book, three papers examine the effects of accountability standards and school choice on equal opportunity in education. In chapter 10, Bishop and Mane compare different types of high school academic course requirements in the United States, and conclude that the only effective standards policy for equal opportunity is a higher academic-course graduation requirements policy. In chapter 11, Burgess, McConnell, Propper and Wilson show that school choice in England is significantly related to academic stratification of students between schools. Lastly, Checchi and Jappelli discuss school choice in Italy, concluding that school vouchers may contribute to equal opportunity in Italy, as they could enable working-class Italians students to attend private schools (chapter 12).

Thus, the book concludes on a contradictory note - is school choice good or bad for equal opportunity? – and with no real policy recommendations. In their introduction, the editors conclude that "Schools can and should be expected to challenge all students to their highest potential. That is best done through an efficient system of education that uses available resources to challenge each child so as to realize their potential" (p.22). This conclusion seems to be ambiguous and disconnected from the research presented in the book. What is "efficient"? How do you "challenge each child"?

The book's strengths lie in its international approach and its policy orientation. Nevertheless, as the chapters focus on quantitative research which can be complicated at times, this book faces limited readership. The topic of equal educational opportunity is of great interest to sociologists and comparative researchers, and the studies presented in the book make important contributions to equal opportunity research, but methodologically it may be too challenging for most non-econometricians and graduate students.

The book also lacks a clear message – after the peer group and school resources are ruled out, the book looks inconclusively at school choice and academic standards, with no focus in discussion or otherwise on the alternative solutions presented in some of the chapters. As research in the field is full of contradictory findings, so is this collection; and the reader realizes, yet again, that we still know so little about what really works in schools to promote equal opportunity.

About the Reviewer

Noga Admon

Noga Admon is an assistant professor for sociology of education at the University of Iowa. Her research interests are educational inequality, social inequity, and stratification in higher education.

Editors: Gene V Glass, Kate Corby, Gustavo Fischman