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Education Policy and Equality: Some Evidence from Europe

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Abstract : **Background**

The school reforms that have taken place in Europe since the 1960s were designed to enhance economic growth and enable social classes that had been historically excluded to access secondary and higher education. Despite the sharp increase in enrolment at these education levels, inequality of access based on social class seems to have persisted in Europe.

The authors of this article sought to ascertain this outcome by analyzing data on the breakdown per social class of students entering university between 1950 and 1990 in France, Sweden, England and Germany. The authors then compared post-secondary enrolment rates in these countries to United States rates.

Results

According to the authors, the comprehensive schools model is neither necessary nor sufficient to reduce inequalities of access (equalization) to the secondary and post-secondary levels based on social class. Adoption of this model prompted Sweden, England and France to increase access to higher education. However, increasing equality of access based on social class has not been clearly established (accessibility increased while differences in access opportunity based on social class remained the same). In contrast, Germany succeeded in expanding both secondary and higher education enrolments by keeping a traditional system while equalizing opportunities for access based on social class.

The authors emphasized that reducing inequality takes on a different meaning across countries. For instance, in the U.S. it means increasing the number of places in higher education, while in Sweden it refers to a general reduction in class inequality.

Now that the most advantaged social classes have virtually total access to higher education, it would seem logical that any future increase directly serves to reduce inequalities of access across social classes by providing the most disadvantaged classes with greater access to higher education.

Lastly, the increase in secondary and higher education access rates is tied to the diversification of academic or training fields. This process has created a new hierarchy within higher education, linked to class structure and largely based on difficulty of entry, length of training, career rewards and cost.

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