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EENEE and NESET II Conference - Brussels, 23 November 2017



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Education, inequality and social mobility

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Outline

- Scene setting – Education and Training Monitor 2017
- Cognitive skills, education and social mobility
- The role of social and emotional skills ('soft skills')
- Streaming and setting in schools
- The education 'arms race' between the state and wealthy parents
- Policy discussion





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Scene setting – Education and Training Monitor 2017



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Scene setting – Education and Training Monitor 2017

- The lead theme is inequality in education and the important role that education plays in building a fairer society
- Inequality remains a challenge for Europe (intergenerational transmission, the association between migrant background and educational attainment, the link between educational attainment and a range of social outcomes)
- Progress towards 2020 targets
 - Good progress on **early leavers from education and training**
 - Slight progress on **tertiary educational attainment**
 - Backwards on **low achievers in reading, maths and science**
 - Improvement in **employment rates of recent graduates**
 - No progress **for adult participation in learning**
- Decrease in basic competencies is cause for concern



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Part 1: Equity, a challenge for education

- High and rising levels of economic inequality characterise many European countries
- There does not appear to be a systematic relationship between income inequality and average performance in science assessments nor percentage of low achievers
- Education inequalities feed into a range of other social and economic outcomes (self-reliance, social support networks, unemployment risks, mortality risks, perceived health status and, of course, income and overall standard of living)
- *“Socio-economic status is one of the main determinants for the acquisition of basic skills and for success in adult life. The strong link has considerable influence both on the individual and on the country-level performance. In many countries, schools could do more to break the existing patterns of socio-economic advantage, contribute to a more equitable distribution of learning opportunities and outcomes”*
- The phenomenon of private tutoring (shadow education)
- Unequal education systems aggravate inequality





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Cognitive skills, education and social mobility



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Education, inequality and social mobility

In many countries, according to various measures, educational inequalities have been decreasing. However:

- This has not led to a fall in earnings or income inequality.
- This has not led to a increase in relative social mobility.
- Why and what are the policy implications?

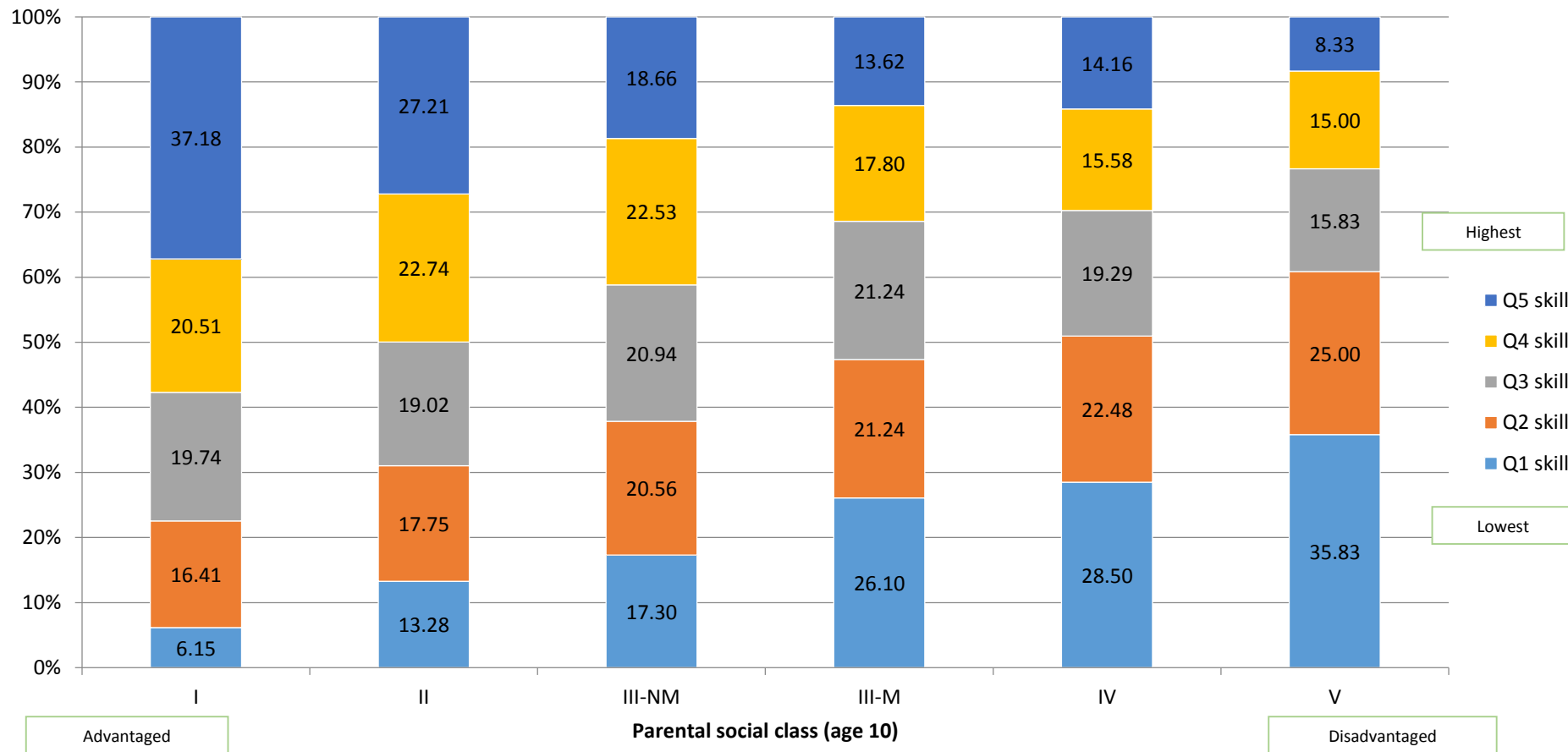


Family background and cognitive skills age 5 (UK)

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Downward mobility, opportunity hoarding and the 'glass floor'

- Based on early cognitive skill assessments, children from advantaged family backgrounds do better in the labour market (top job/high earner) irrespective of initial skill levels
- Early low attaining children (in cognitive skill tests) from advantaged families are more likely to be high earners than early high attaining children from disadvantaged families
- Better-off parents are very successful at protecting their children from experiencing downward mobility. How do they do this?
 - Use their own higher levels of educational attainment to help their children
 - Ensure that their children's attainment improves (maths and literacy) by using various strategies
 - Help their children develop positive social and emotional skills
 - Make sure their children attend the best possible schools (including fee-paying schools)
- Why is this a problem? With limited downward mobility and opportunity hoarding there is much less chance for children from disadvantaged families to be upwardly mobile





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The role of social and emotional skills ('soft skills')



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Social and emotional skills

- Could be seen as the new 'frontier' (with origins in child health and development)
- Growing body of research on the importance of soft skills/social and emotional skills/character skills/non-cognitive skills
- Behavioural problems in children (poor emotional health, externalising and internalising childhood behavioural problems) have been shown to be linked to a variety of poorer child and adult outcomes such as educational attainment, personal safety, health and relationships
- The impact of poor child behaviour on other children (eg bullying) can have long lasting effects into adulthood





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A birth cohort of British children all born in 1970

Information was collected from their parents and teachers when cohort members were children

Continues to survey birth cohort members

Parents responded to questions on behavioural problems when the child was aged 5, 10 and 16



Rutter Parental 'A' Scale of Behaviour Disorder

1	Very restless, often running about or jumping up and down
2	Is squirmy or fidgety
3	Often destroys own or others property
4	Frequently fights with other children
5	Not much liked by other children
6	Often worried, worries about many things
7	Tends to do things on own - rather solitary
8	Irritable, is quick to fly off the handle
9	Often appears miserable, unhappy, tearful or distressed
10	Sometimes takes things belonging to others
11	Has twitches, mannerisms or tics of the face or body
12	Frequently sucks thumb or fingers
13	Frequently bites nails or fingers
14	Is often disobedient
15	Cannot settle to anything for more than a few moments
16	Tends to be fearful or afraid of new things or new situations
17	Is fussy or over-particular
18	Often tells lies
19	Bullies other children

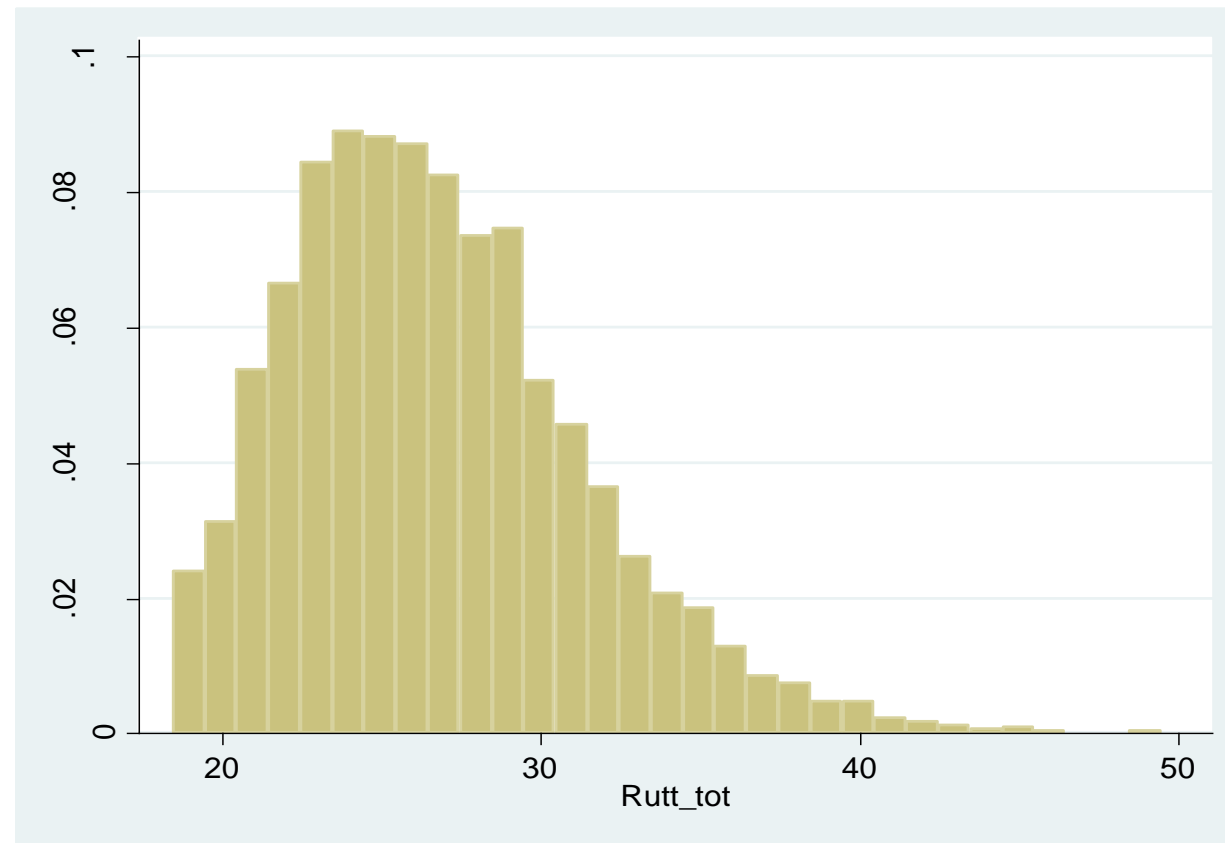
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Total behaviour score age 5





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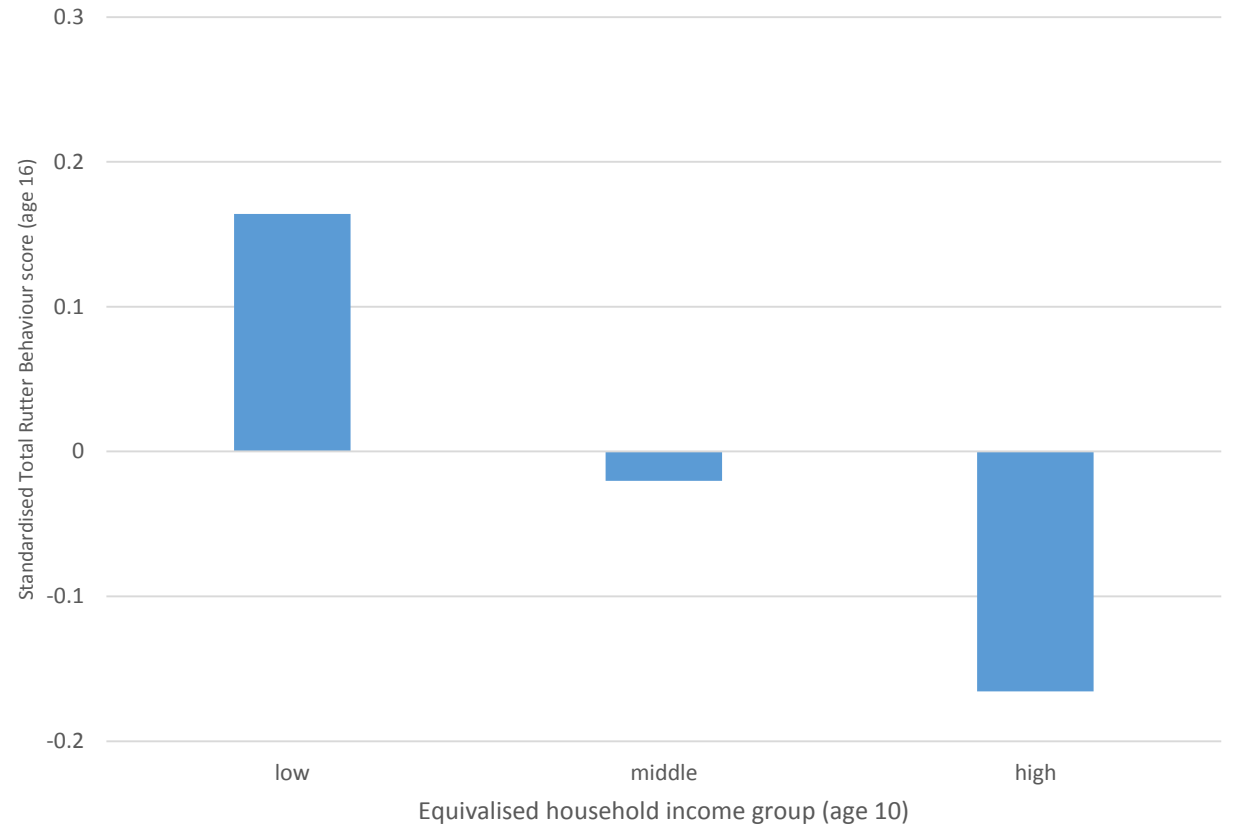
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Behaviour score at age 16 by
family income age 10

Children in lower income
families have higher
behaviour scores



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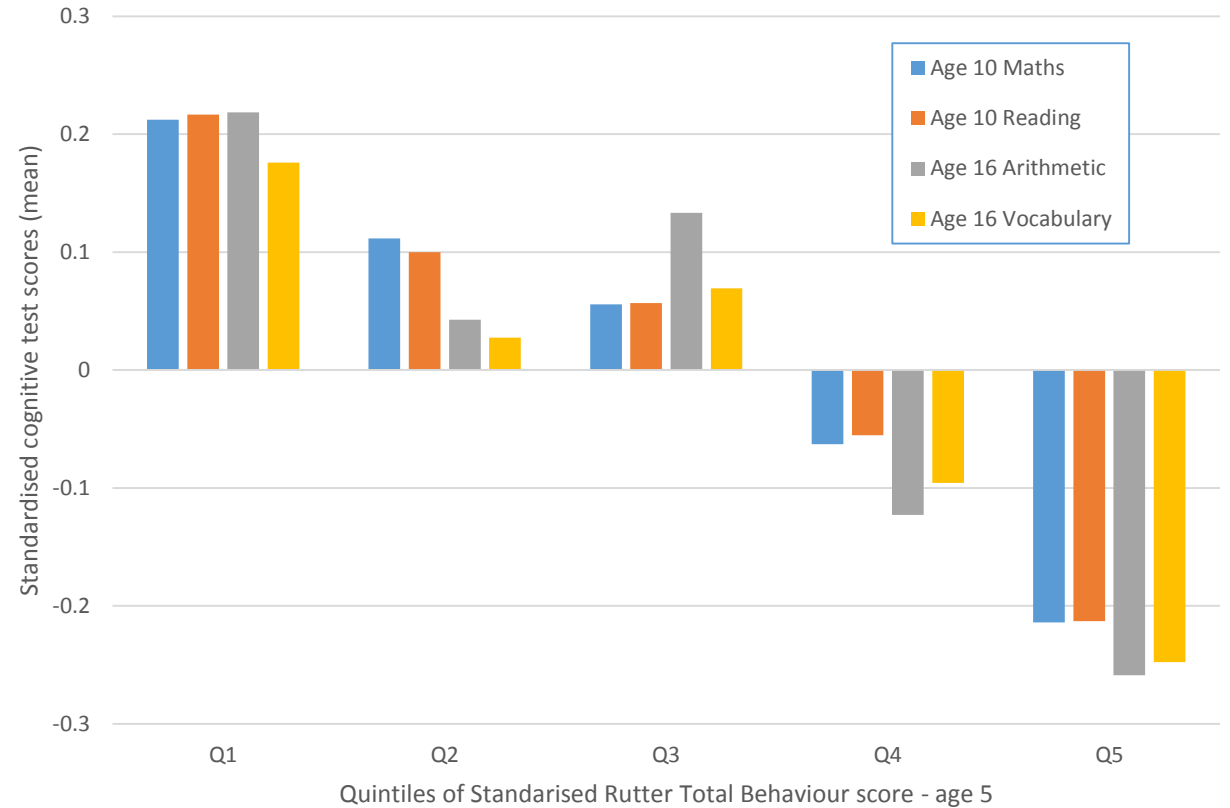
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Average cognitive skills at age 10 and 16 by behaviour score quintiles age 5

Children with higher behaviour scores (more problematic behaviours) at age 5 do less well in literacy and numeracy skill tests at age 10 and age 16



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Results from statistical models found that children with higher behavioural scores at age 10 and age 16 were more likely to:

- Have parents with low levels of educational attainment
- Have a younger mother
- Have a mother with poor psychological well-being (malaise)
- Have a childhood disability

And that these factors accounted for the social gradient observed in the raw data

Results from statistical models estimating the relationships between child behavioural problems (age 5) and cognitive skill outcomes (age 10) found that:

- Less than half of the correlation observed in the raw data can be accounted for by controls for family and individual characteristics (social class, older siblings, parental education, young mother, poor maternal psychological well-being)





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Streaming and setting in schools



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Streaming and setting by competence

- The use of streaming and setting by competence varies widely by countries and by schools but most schools/teachers use some form of setting
- There is an extensive literature on how streaming and setting can exacerbate education inequalities and even strengthen the relationship between family background and educational attainment
- I will not review this literature here but highlight some important findings which have just been published on how 'negative feedback' mechanisms can create additional problems



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The relationship between stream placement and teachers' judgements of pupils: Evidence from the Millennium Cohort Study

Tammy Campbell (CASE/LSE)

London Review of Education, Volume 15, Number 3, November 2017

- Tests the hypothesis that stream placement influences teacher judgements of pupils, thus investigating a route through which streaming by 'ability' may contribute to inequalities.
- Regression modelling examines whether teachers' reported perceptions of 'ability and attainment' correspond to the stream in which a pupil is situated.
- Children with similar characteristics, who perform equivalently on recent, independent, salient cognitive tests, and who have equal prior attainment, are compared.
- Findings: teachers' judgements of pupils ability is influenced by their stream placement.





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The education 'arms race' between the state and wealthy parents



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The education 'arms race' between the state and rich parents

Governments are seeking to reduce education inequalities through trying to raise attainment at the bottom, narrowing differences in school leaving qualifications and increasing enrolment at tertiary level

However, as parents know only too well this is not where the 'battle lines' are drawn

While the labour market continues to reward higher levels of qualification, well-off families will continue to do all they can to ensure that their children are in the best position to benefit from these wage premiums.

Chapter 4 in "Education and social mobility: theory, evidence and policy challenges", in Johnes, G., Johnes, J., Agasisti, T., and Lopez-Torres, L. (eds) Handbook of Contemporary Education Economics, Edward Elgar.

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- To increase relative social mobility through education it will be necessary to improve relative educational attainment of children from less advantaged family backgrounds.
- This is likely to face some resistance from better-off families who will seek to guard their more privileged position and protect their children from potential downward social mobility.
- We see evidence of an education 'race' with better-off families seeking to stay ahead by ensuring that their children attain ever higher levels of qualifications, achieve the highest grades at each level, choose subjects that are well-rewarded, attend the best schools, apply to the most prestigious universities.
- Estimates of education inequalities that focus on meeting minimum thresholds of competence or even enrolment at tertiary level education will not pick up the true levels of educational inequality



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- The challenge for governments is that in rich and middle income countries where inequality is high, well-off families will continue to be able to accumulate large 'war-chests'.
- This makes it very difficult for governments to compete in terms of the level of resources available to spend on improving education outcomes for children from less-advantaged family backgrounds.
- In many European countries, greater expansion of managerial and professional occupations in the last two decades of the twentieth century created more 'room at the top' and this meant that there was an increase in absolute (upwards) social mobility.
- Rather ironically, in some countries at least, this was a period over which relative mobility fell but this was less cause for concern as most people were better off in real terms



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- The slow down in growth following the financial crisis has meant that there are now more limited opportunities for absolute (upwards) mobility and even more reason for those in a privileged position to seek to prevent downward mobility.
- This is not a criticism of parents who are acting rationally and doing the right thing for their children but it does highlight the challenges for those seeking to improve social mobility through education policy.



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Policy discussion

- Recognise that there is a limit to what schools can do to solve the wider 'inequality problem'
- In highly unequal societies where financial returns to education are high, educational attainment can be improved through parental financial investments, the best opportunities in the education system and the labour market can be hoarded by those from advantaged families, other bolder steps need to be taken
- Schools could do more to develop and foster healthy social and emotional skills, and tackle bullying. Research suggests that this will reap dividends both for educational attainment and for employment outcomes
- Schools could improve the way they use 'streaming' and 'setting' to ensure that it does not disadvantage children without highly motivated parents, and influence teachers' judgement of children's ability
- Policy should seek to reduce education inequalities in the adult population
- Setting of homework should not advantage/disadvantage children according to their family background
- The deployment of teachers and teaching assistance needs more attention





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