Book Review

Hadjar, Andreas, & Christiane Gross (eds.), 2016

Do educational systems increase, reduce or maintain social inequalities? This question has interested sociologists since at least the 1960s. The associated issue is whether social inequalities have declined, and, if so, are changes in institutional arrangements responsible? There are many ways in which educational systems can influence social inequalities: through the allocation of both physical and human resources to schools; the provision, and characteristics, of vocational education; and most importantly through educational differentiation, where students are sorted into different streams within schools or tracks between schools. The Hadjar and Gross volume is unable to answer these questions as it concludes that “there are few ultimate answers to the questions of which education system characteristics are most useful in providing education for all, in reducing inequalities and in maintaining best labour market and living conditions” (pg. 340). The ‘few ultimate answers’ are not provided.

Over the last decade there has been an increasing number of edited books on education where authors from a range of countries contribute to chapters relating to a general theme. The problem with this strategy is that the contributions are quite heterogenous, sometimes contradictory, so it is very difficult for editors to draw conclusions. In the Hadjar and Gross volume, most authors conclude that higher levels of educational differentiation increase social inequalities, but “some chapters cast doubt on these conclusions” (pg. 340). The chapter that casts the most doubt is by Hartmut Esser which argues (and demonstrates) that pre-sorting abilities need to be incorporated into any analysis on educational inequalities and tracking.

There are some useful empirical findings in this volume. Bol and van de Werfhorst confirm that youth employment is lower in countries with dual academic and vocational systems. Ballarino, Bernadi and Panchella found a decline in educational inequality by parental education which they attribute
to educational expansion. Hadjar and Buchman found that gender inequalities are smaller in countries with less differentiated educational systems and that with increasing size of educational systems, women's opportunities increase. In contrast, Dronkers and Korthals conclude that immigrant students exhibit higher (or more equal scores) compared to native students in multi-track compared to comprehensive systems.

My issue with the volume is that it downplays the empirical reality that children differ in their innate abilities and there is genetic transmission from parents to children. Therefore, the effects of standard sociological influences – parental occupational class, parental education, family income and wealth – on educational differentiation, test scores, educational attainment and labour market outcomes may largely reflect the associations between parental ability and parents' socioeconomic attainments (which are considerable), parental and student ability ($r \approx 0.5$), and student ability and these outcomes.

Student ability is central to the examination of educational differentiation and social inequality. Ability is typically a much stronger influence on educational outcomes than the commonly used sociological variables, although the comparison of relative strength is not provided in this volume. The only chapter that deals with student ability comprehensively is Esser's chapter. It is not mentioned in Bol and van de Werfhorst's chapter on inequality of educational opportunity. Hadjar and Becker's chapter on meritocracy discusses cognitive ability but their empirical analyses of the European Social Survey do not (and could not) include cognitive ability. However, they conclude that “Inequality of educational opportunities and intergenerational status attainment is still strongly linked to class” (pg. 252). This statement is not true. The correlations of class-of-origin with education, occupational status and income are only around 0.3 (or less) and net of ability, the associations are substantially weaker. For labour market outcomes, the effects of social class are very weak when considering both education and cognitive ability.

What is more disappointing about this volume is the absence of any reference to relevant behavioural genetics literature. This literature shows that the heritability – that is the proportion of the variance due to genes is 40-60% for educational attainment, and 30-50% for occupational status and income. Most behavioural genetic studies of occupational status and income (but not so much for education) find that the contribution of the shared environment is small, sometimes negligible. It is the shared environment that encompasses the sociological factors (background and possibly schools) that sociologists are interested in. This makes sense in that most parents have little influence on their children's socioeconomic careers once they enter the labour market. What would be interesting would be an edited cross-national collection on the