

EDUCATION AS A MEANS OF SOCIAL MOBILITY: OPPORTUNITY OR OBSTACLE?

Loso Judijanto *

IPOSS Jakarta, Indonesia
losojudijantobumn@gmail.com

Al-Amin

Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya, Indonesia
al.amin-2024@feb.unair.ac.id

Abstract

Education has long been recognised as a key means of achieving social mobility, where it can act as a tool that provides opportunities or makes it difficult for individuals to move up in the social strata. This study uses the literature method. The results show that education can provide insights, skills and certifications that enable individuals to obtain better jobs and improve their socio-economic status. Education is also recognised as a factor that helps spread progressive ideas, which contributes to overall social development. However, along with these positive impacts, education also has an ambivalent role. In many cases, unequal and exclusive education systems have hindered social mobility, especially for individuals from marginalised groups. Issues such as high tuition fees, curricula that do not match market needs, and discrimination in education are significant barriers. Thus, to achieve the full potential of education as a tool for social mobility, policies must be designed in such a way that they overcome such barriers and provide equitable access to quality education for all members of society.

Keywords: Education, Social Mobility.

INTRODUCTION

Social mobility refers to the movement of individuals or groups within the social hierarchical structure of society. Such mobility can be vertical, i.e. movement up or down in the social strata, or horizontal, where there is movement between sectors or occupations without a change in social class. Social mobility is an important indicator of the level of equality and fairness in a society, and can influence the potential for economic growth and social stability. (Breen & Jonsson, 2020)..

Social mobility, then, is a concept that explains the movement of individuals or groups within the social stratification structure of society. It includes changes in social status that can occur vertically or horizontally. Vertical refers to upward or downward mobility in the social hierarchy, such as movement from the lower economic class to the middle class or vice versa, often related to changes in income, education, occupation, or wealth. (Vallet, 2020). Meanwhile, horizontal mobility is a movement that occurs within the same social strata but involves a change in employment sector or geographical environment. Social mobility is considered a barometer of the health of a society in terms of social equality and integration, and provides an overview of the

opportunities available to its citizens to improve their quality of life (Falcon, 2020). (Falcon, 2020).

The importance of social mobility in society cannot be ignored. High social mobility is often associated with equal opportunities for individuals to develop their potential without being limited by their birth status or economic background. This creates a more meritocratic society, where individual achievement and competence become the determining factors of success more than social inheritance or wealth (Gil-Hernández et al. (Gil-Hernández et al., 2020).. In this context, social mobility is an important indicator of equality of opportunity and distributive justice. Moreover, dynamic mobility stimulates innovation, economic growth, and social stability by reducing tensions and conflicts that may arise from inequality or stagnant social classes. Therefore, social mobility plays a strategic role in the formation of a just and progressive society. (Hertel & Pfeffer, 2020)..

Education is considered as one of the key factors that has the potential to enhance social mobility by providing individuals with the knowledge and skills necessary to improve their socioeconomic position. Classical theories in sociology, such as the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Max Weber, have dissected the role of education in the process of social mobility, often portraying education as a mechanism to achieve equality and counter rigid social stratification. (Sitopu et al., 2024); (Fawait et al., 2024); (Syakhrani & Aslan, 2024); (Sartika & Fransiska, 2024).

However, the observed social reality is much more complex. There is intense debate over the extent to which education truly acts as a social 'escalator' that allows individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds to rise to higher social strata. Many studies have found that education can also function as a 'filter' that reinforces social class divisions, with children from families with higher socioeconomic status having better access to quality education, while children from disadvantaged families face significant barriers. (Reece, 2021).

Socioeconomic background, government education policies, educational infrastructure, environmental and cultural factors, as well as individual attitudes and family support have been identified as important contributors to the dimensions of education as a tool of social mobility. Therefore, it is important to discuss and understand the complexities of education in relation to social mobility to ascertain whether the current education system acts more as an opportunity-opener or a barrier-builder. (Narot & Kiettikunwong, 2023)..

This research aims to extensively review relevant academic literature to extract a detailed understanding of the role of education in social mobility, considering both sides of the argument. This background is important to facilitate an assessment of education - whether it serves as an effective tool to advance social mobility or vice versa, and in which contexts such influence operates.

Research Methods

The study in this research uses literature. The literature research method is a systematic process undertaken to collect, evaluate and analyse scientific publications relevant to a particular topic, with the aim of gaining a comprehensive understanding of pre-existing knowledge. This process involves identifying relevant sources such as books, journal articles, theses, dissertations, and other research reports, which match the inclusion and exclusion criteria set by the researcher. (JUNAIDI, 2021); (Abdussamad, 2022). After that, a researcher will read and record the main findings and arguments in these sources, detect patterns, discrepancies, or gaps in the existing literature, and synthesise the information to produce a theoretical framework or foundation for further research. This method is mainly used in domain mapping or as an initial step in empirical research design to ensure that research questions are original and relevant. (Wekke, 2020).

Results and Discussion

Education as an Opportunity for Social Mobility

Social mobility refers to the movement of individuals or groups between different levels in the social stratification system in society. This phenomenon can involve changes in social, economic or educational status from one generation to the next or within an individual's own life. Social mobility can occur in two ways: vertical mobility and horizontal mobility (Holmlund & Nybom, 2023). Vertical mobility occurs when there is a change in position leading to a higher (upward mobility) or lower (downward mobility) social stratum, which often relates to changes in income, employment or education. Meanwhile, horizontal mobility refers to movement between positions within the same social tier, such as moving from one job to another that is equivalent in the social structure of the society. (Jin, 2024).

These types of social mobility can be further differentiated into intragenerational and intergenerational mobility. Intragenerational mobility occurs over the life span of a single generation, reflecting changes in an individual's social status due to educational attainment, career, or other economic factors. Examples of this mobility include promotions in employment or educational upgrades that lead to better jobs (Pollak & Müller, 2020). Intergenerational mobility, on the other hand, compares social status between generations within a family, for example children achieving higher levels of education or employment status compared to their parents. Both types of mobility are important in measuring the social and economic dynamics of a society and assessing the effectiveness of the opportunities provided to its citizens to improve their living conditions. (Saeed, 2022).

Education has long been recognised as one of the main factors that can trigger social mobility. Social mobility itself refers to the movement or change in the position of a person or group in the social structure of society. With education, individuals are

given the opportunity to improve their quality of life and potentially achieve a higher social position compared to previous generations. This creates a perception that education is the key to breaking the cycle of poverty and improving living standards. (Heidenreich, 2022).

Education provides individuals with the skills and knowledge needed to access better opportunities in life. For example, individuals who have access to better education have a greater chance of securing higher paying jobs, access to better healthcare, and the ability to actively participate in social and political activities. This directly offers them the opportunity to move up in the social hierarchy, proving that education is a very effective tool in promoting social mobility. (McDonald & Korber, 2023).

On the other hand, education is also capable of changing people's views and attitudes towards various social issues, encouraging them to be more critical and innovative. Thus, individuals are not only able to improve their own living conditions but can also contribute to broader social change, promoting the development of a more inclusive and equitable society. In other words, education not only impacts vertical social mobility (movement to higher social strata) but also horizontal (change in role or status within the same social stratum). (Wenz & Hoenig, 2020).

However, it is important to remember that access to quality education remains a major challenge in many parts of the world. Inequalities in access to education, which often stem from economic, racial, gender or geographical differences, can deprive individuals and groups of social mobility opportunities. To fully benefit from education as a tool for social mobility, inclusive policies and initiatives need to continue to be developed and strengthened, ensuring every individual has equal access to quality education, regardless of their background. (Brown, 2022).

Overall, education is not just about acquiring knowledge, but also about opening doors to bigger and better opportunities. Through education, individuals can improve their own capacities and, ultimately, contribute to the advancement of society as a whole. Despite the obstacles that still need to be overcome, the potential of education as a tool of social mobility has significant power to change society for the better.

Education as a Barrier to Social Mobility

While education is often recognised as a driver of social mobility, in many contexts, a paradox occurs when education becomes a barrier to social movement. Inequalities in the education system often create barriers for individuals from lower economic groups to access quality education, indirectly limiting their potential to rise to higher social strata. These discrepancies often stem from resource differences between schools, where quality facilities and teaching staff tend to be concentrated in more affluent areas, leaving lower economic areas with less adequate education (Beckett, 2024). (Beckett, 2024).

Furthermore, quality education is often associated with high costs. This creates financial barriers for families with low incomes, who may find it difficult to afford their child's education at a reputable institution. Thus, education, which is supposed to be a means of welfare, can turn into a tool for the inheritance of social inequality, where only those who can afford to pay can fully benefit from quality education (Ruks, 2022). (Ruks, 2022).

Unequal education standards also have a long-term impact on the labour market. With low-quality education, students lack the opportunity to develop the skills and competencies needed to compete in the modern world of work. This can lead to an intractable cycle of poverty, where young people find low-paying jobs and inadequate working conditions. Such effects reinforce existing social class structures, limiting access to social mobility for those at the bottom. (Lucas, 2023).

Moreover, inequitable education systems are often reproduced through curricula that favour certain sections of society and ignore the needs or histories of disadvantaged groups. For example, the language and culture dominated in teaching materials often reflect the norms of the dominant group in society, while perspectives from minority groups are sidelined or unrecognised. (Sun et al., 2020). This reality has the potential to create a sense of not belonging and isolation among students from disadvantaged groups, hindering their ability to participate fully both in academic contexts and in the broader social spectrum. (Arribas, 2023).

Education should be a driving force for creating a more just and equitable society. However, if not designed with engagement and equity, it can instead crystallise barriers to social mobility, freeze stratification and reduce opportunities for all people to reach their full potential. Thus, inclusive and equitable education reforms are key to ensuring that education becomes a pathway and not a wall for social mobility. (Judijanto et al., 2024); (Iksal et al., 2024).

Furthermore, to overcome the problem of education becoming a barrier to social mobility, intervention from both the government and other relevant institutions is necessary. These interventions should be directed at narrowing the education gap by evaluating and funding the education system more equitably, as well as providing subsidies or financial assistance for students from underprivileged families. (Langridge, 2023). Similarly, there is a need for inclusive curriculum reforms that represent and guarantee social and cultural diversity so that all students feel they are represented and respected in the educational environment. Initiatives such as scholarships, mentorship programmes and access to the latest educational technologies should also be a central part of efforts to remove barriers to social mobility caused by unequal education. (Thaning, 2021).

Thus, education can become a barrier to social mobility if it is not implemented with the principles of equality and justice. An education system that does not take into account the different backgrounds and economic needs of its students has the potential

to widen the gap of social inequality rather than address it. It is important for policymakers, educators and communities to work together to create an egalitarian educational environment that not only provides equal opportunities for all individuals to progress, but also reflects and values the diversity that exists in society. By placing equality as a top priority, education can once again become a key driving force in promoting social mobility and achieving a more equitable and inclusive society.

Conclusion

The role of education in social mobility is complex and two-sided. On the one hand, education is an important tool that can provide opportunities for individuals to improve their socioeconomic status through improved skills and knowledge. With quality education, individuals gain access to better job opportunities, higher salaries and wider social recognition. Education also enables the spread of innovation and technology adoption, both of which are vital for sustainable economic growth and community development.

On the other hand, education can be a barrier to social mobility if it is unequal or inaccessible to all. Inequality in the distribution of educational resources, discrimination in the learning environment and high tuition fees can prevent people from disadvantaged backgrounds from advancing, creating a cycle of poverty that is difficult to break. In addition, education policies that do not meet local labour market needs can lead to skill gaps that widen economic disparities. Therefore, for education to function as a true tool of social mobility, there must be consistent efforts to overcome these barriers and ensure that education becomes a bridge to equitable opportunities for every individual in society.

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