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Education and Opportunity

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Education and Opportunity

An individual's education ensures that individual's opportunity. This two-pronged nature of education-opportunity dynamics is explored in most development reports in which accessibility is considered a pivotal factor in educational expansion and generation of opportunities. There are social factors, however, such as gender disparity and inequity that impede the favorable impact of education on people's chances and opportunities. Identifying the factors that facilitate or hinder the impact of education on opportunities is important in understanding the development trajectory of any government or state.

At the regional level, the accessibility of education depends largely on the economies and development status of countries. According to the 2012 United Nations Economic, Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Global Education Digest, the goal of achieving universal primary education by 2015 may not be attained due to grade repetition and children leaving school before completing their education. For most developed states in Europe and North America, achievement of primary education is a goal that has long been realized; but for the majority of countries in sub-Saharan Africa, south and west [p. 443 ↓] Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean, this goal has not been achieved, which, as UNESCO aptly describes it, constitutes "opportunities lost" in the organization's long-standing fight against poverty.

At the individual's level, accessibility of and in education is an actualization of a basic right. This right, however, is marred by underfunding, especially in underdeveloped and developing countries. According to UNESCO's Education for All (EFA) Global Monitory Report 2013/4, 57 million children and 69 million adolescents are out of school. These children might have attended school during their first years, but were not able to remain in school due to socially propelled forces such as conflict and wars in the African region, child labor, human trafficking, and displacement. Not having access to education is tantamount to opportunities lost in early years of life.

In developed states, accessibility to higher education is an ongoing challenge. As tuition and fees in universities increase every year in the United Kingdom and the United

States, while parents' salaries fall below inflation, a lot of young people cannot attend a university, thus limiting their opportunity to participate in a knowledge-based society.

Accessibility to education does not always accrue equal opportunities. Every child is entitled to be in primary school; however, not all children receive the same type and quality of education. Horace Mann, a prominent 19th-century American education reformer, believed that education was central to equality of opportunity; regrettably, historical and recent data reveal that gender disparity, discriminatory policies, and economic sources define the kind of opportunity available to people.

Gender Disparity

Gender disparity in the sub-Saharan African region and in some Arab states remains unresolved. The EFA report estimated that in 2011, only 60 percent of the surveyed countries had achieved gender parity in primary education and 28 percent in secondary education. Disparity is further exacerbated by gender inequity and inequality where boys and girls do not have the same access and rights to educational opportunities. Beliefs and norms rooted in one's culture are the chronic barriers to equal chances in education. While boys are expected to find their niche in the workforce, girls are often restricted to household chores and family responsibilities. In some parts of Asia, strong patrilineal upbringing bar women from attending universities, thereby, reducing their chances of garnering equal opportunities in the job market.

Inequity in education is another societal problem that influences people's life chances, with more women affected due to insufficient or absent enabling mechanisms. While gender equality connotes that men and women are provided with the same or "equal" opportunities to become productive in society, gender equity also asserts that men and women must be given opportunities based on their status, needs, and resources. In most societies, women are primarily caretakers of their homes and caregivers of their children. Most men, though, are freed from household-oriented roles; thus, they have a considerable amount of time to study and advance in their professional careers. To mitigate this growing inequity between the two genders, some countries provide women with access to educational arrangements that allow them to study through distance modes and flexible lifelong learning programs. Welfare types of support such as child

vouchers for child nursery, maternity, and paternity leave and open schedules are likewise strategic in providing access to both men and women.

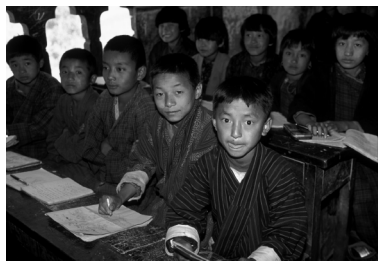
Education Quality, Inequality, and Opportunity

When the quality of education is unequal, access to opportunities also becomes unequal for most people. This reinforces the idea of R. C. Rist that, though education can be a provider of equal opportunity, it can, in some cases, be the instrument that preserves inequality. Several existing and emerging factors contribute to this, including the globalizing market of education. In a case study conducted by Anatoly Oleksiyenko in Hong Kong, the upward mobility of students in their educational pursuits resulted in an outbound mobility to earn degrees in foreign universities, as this will provide these students an advantage in obtaining opportunities. While studying in a foreign country can prove beneficial for students who have the means to afford education overseas, it also has adverse implications for the job market; the majority of students cannot obtain [p. 444 ↓] foreign-based diplomas, and so they will become second in line for opportunity, even if they are as smart and well-educated as their peers.

Why is there scarcity in opportunities despite greater access to education? Stratification theories provide plausible explanations for this phenomenon. Theorists like Adrian E. Raftery, Michael Hout, and Samuel R. Lucas identify socioeconomic resources as factors that impact students' prospects and life chances, consequently maintaining inequality. In Taiwan, Cheng Sheng Yao found that despite the growth of universities, stratification becomes more pronounced as students do not have the same access to quality of education. Socioeconomic resource is one determining factor that commands varying access to education and ultimately to opportunities. This is more glaring in nonegalitarian societies, as in Nigeria, where Ken Asagwara concluded that free education does not automatically lead to equal access to educational services and opportunities because socioeconomic resources limit or widen a person's capacity to avail the services and utilize the opportunities.

Despite the adverse effects of educational expansion in some countries, this growth has also resulted in easier access to educational opportunities and better work prospects, especially for the young population, as they have strategic and fast social mobility through promotions and rewards. For people who have achieved foreign-conferred degrees and participated in international training, more opportunities are available for them compared to those who have fewer international exposures.

For most developed states in Europe and North America, achievement of primary education is a goal that has long been realized; but for many countries in sub-Saharan Africa, south and west Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean, this goal has not been achieved, which, as UNESCO aptly describes it, constitutes “opportunities lost” in the organization’s long-standing fight against poverty. Pictured here are, schoolchildren in Bhutan. (World Bank/Curt Carnemark)



[p. 445 ↓] Today, with the growing marketization of education, especially in the higher-education sector, students are becoming more categorized, and opportunities are becoming more challenging to acquire. In underdeveloped and developing countries, this stratification is more evident due to insufficient educational support and infrastructure. In developed countries, the dictates of policies related to internationalization, integration, and globalization have compelled universities to compete for prestige, ranking, and funding, which, inadvertently, have resulted in skyrocketing tuition fees that are not within the grasp of the majority of students. It is only in egalitarian states that opportunities are generally equal to all, but the pressing demand to continuously upgrade schools and universities have left governments in a dilemma about whether to modify or retain the law granting free education to all citizens.

What is clear from studies is the direct relation between education and opportunities regardless of the country's sociodemographic profile. What seems to be alarming, however, is the overt command of socioeconomic resources on a person's chance of gaining opportunity. Thus, it is imperative that governments provide mechanisms that minimize, if not totally eradicate, uneven educational access and differing opportunities to people. It is only through this active government intervention that people can attain the best social capital for achieving sustainable development.

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See Also: Dropout Rates; Education Equity; Education Theories; Gender-Parity Index; National Policies for Education; Social Inequality; Universal Primary Education.

Further Readings

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