

Mixing with 'better educated' families improves life chances of lower income children, research finds

June 21 2023, by Samantha Martin



In Norway, higher education is free and there are no private schools. Credit: University of York

Children from low education backgrounds are more likely to enroll in "elite" degree programs that lead to high paying jobs if they go to school with children whose parents have those degrees themselves, says new research.

These high-paying degrees, such as medicine, economics and law, from highly-selective universities (Ivy League equivalents), lead to higher lifetime earnings for graduates. This means the findings could be useful for shaping [government policy](#) to increase social mobility, say researchers.

The study of Norwegian schoolchildren found that classes where children from both low and high-education families are more equally mixed have higher enrollment in elite programs at these universities, equivalent to studying subjects like medicine or law at Ivy League institutions (U.S.).

The research was carried out by Professor Emma Tominey from the University of York's Department of Economics and Related Studies, Dr. Sarah Cattan from the Institute of Fiscal Studies, and Professor Kjell Salvanes from the Norwegian School of Economics. The work was presented by Professor Tominey at the [Society of the Economics of the Household \(SEHO\) conference](#) in Copenhagen.

Norwegian system

In Norway, higher education is free and there are no [private schools](#). Yet, inequalities in [higher education](#) are stark: nearly half of those attending elite institutions come from families in the top 20% of earnings, whereas only 7% come from the lowest 20%. In Norway, children's educational records can be linked to data on their parents, including occupation, education and [income](#). The researchers analyzed data on nearly 180,000 schoolchildren who started [high school](#) between 2002 and 2012.

The researchers were able to track these children through school, onto university (where relevant) and onto the labor market. Only 3% of [students](#) in Norway study subjects such as medicine, law, economics or

engineering at the top institutions—programs which lead to the greatest earnings in Norway.

The researchers particularly looked at two groups of students: those from lower income families whose parents did not have an elite degree and where at least one parent had no further education beyond school; and those students who had at least one parent who had achieved either a medical, engineering, law or economics degrees.

Improved grades

In a school cohort, the greater the number of students whose parents had an elite degree, the more likely it was that both groups would enroll in that kind of program themselves.

The presence of the more affluent students had two main effects on lower income students: it lowered their grades in some exams but increased their likelihood of applying to one of the top degree programs. The second factor was the stronger force, leading to them being more likely to enroll into an elite degree and for students from a low educated background, to become the first in their families to do so.

The researchers found that the effect of elite peers was to improve grades of lower income students when exams were externally blind marked. But when grades were teacher-assessed, the effect was that lower income students were marked down, creating a negative effect on overall grades.

Social mobility

Professor Tominey believes that governments should consider policies that could ensure greater integration between students from different

economic backgrounds as a means of increasing social mobility.

She said, "The U.K.'s state school system is currently very segregated by income, with little mixing between children from lower and higher income families. Our research shows how important it is for students to mix with others who have experience of these elite institutions, whose parents have attended them, and who can therefore act both as role models and as a source of information about that academic route.

"In policy terms, this is something that is within the power of government to influence, by changing how school places are allocated to ensure a more even mix of students from different economic and educational backgrounds. While this would not necessarily be easy to implement, it could have a major impact on [social mobility](#) and educational equality."

Provided by University of York

Citation: Mixing with 'better educated' families improves life chances of lower income children, research finds (2023, June 21) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-06-families-life-chances-income-children.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.