

### Facts on Inequalities in Educational Attainment

- For individuals born between 1954 and 1964 in such diverse countries as France, Germany, and Sweden, the educational prospects of children of unskilled workers are roughly 10, 9, and 6 times worse than the prospects of children of higher-grade professionals, respectively.
- Roughly half of the class differentials in educational attainment in Denmark—and in many other countries—cannot be explained by the unequal distribution of academic competences among the social classes.
- Inequality in the expectations that adolescents hold for their educational futures is marked in Denmark—one of the most equal countries in the world—and the inequalities have changed little over the past 40 years.

### Empirical Material Behind the Thesis

- Large-scale longitudinal data from the U.S. are employed to learn about the evolution of educational expectations among adolescents
- Nationally representative survey data from Denmark are used in a study of the mechanisms generating persistent inequalities in educational attainment.

### About Kristian Bernt Karlson

Kristian Bernt Karlson is a sociologist working in the areas of educational stratification and social science methodology. His work appears in international journals such as Social Science Research and Sociological Methodology. His dissertation is funded by the Danish Research Council under the auspices of SFI - The Danish National Centre for Social Research and Department of Education, Aarhus University.

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# SCIENCE

## UNEQUAL EXPECTATIONS: SUBJECTIVE BELIEFS, ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE, AND INEQUALITY OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

PhD dissertation by Kristian Bernt Karlson

# UNEQUAL EXPECTATIONS: SUBJECTIVE BELIEFS, ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE, AND INEQUALITY OF EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY

**This thesis examines the significant, yet largely neglected, role that students' beliefs about their educational futures play in generating inequality in educational attainment in today's society.**

## Students' Expectations Matter

- Higher class students tend to pursue more ambitious educational goals than equally talented lower class students, even in today's highly meritocratic societies.
- To explain this puzzle, the dissertation demonstrates that this difference arises as a consequence of differences between the social classes in the expected returns schooling.
- Rooted in families' aversion to seeing their offspring falling down the social ladder, the educational system becomes the central means to securing advantages across generations.

## How Do Expectations Evolve?

- Given the importance of students' expectations in generating educational inequalities, the dissertation asks how students' beliefs about their possible futures evolve over the educational careers.
- Results suggests that students strongly regulate their educational expectations in the light of new information about their academic capabilities as conveyed by institutionalized performance indicators in schools such as ability grouping or grading.

## Methodological Rigor Needed

- The dissertation develops a general method for learning about the mechanisms and their complex interplay that potentially generate class inequalities in educational attainment.
- Applying the method suggests that roughly half of the class differentials in educational attainment in Denmark can, although indirectly, be accounted for by class differences in the expected returns to schooling.

## Conclusion

- Class differences in students' orientations towards their futures play a crucial role in generating class differentials in educational attainment in today's society.
- Although they are grounded in early childhood, these orientations are subject to change and may consequently be equalized.

## Perspectives

- Apart from investing in early cognitive skill formation, society needs to target the beliefs and preferences that provide a crucial basis for the educational choices that students make.
- Schools need to become active participants in students' formation of educational expectations, if educational reform is to reduce class differentials in educational opportunity and thereby promote social mobility.