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ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/utef20>

## The Education Trap: Schools and the Remaking of Inequality in Boston

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To cite this article: Lisa Kenny (2021) The Education Trap: Schools and the Remaking of Inequality in Boston, *The Educational Forum*, 85:2, 232-234, DOI: 10.1080/00131725.2021.1894068

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131725.2021.1894068>



Published online: 19 Mar 2021.



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## BOOK REVIEW

***The Education Trap: Schools and the Remaking of Inequality in Boston***, by C. V. Groeger.  
Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 2021, 384 pp., \$35, ISBN: 7980674249110.

In his 1963 A talk to teachers, James Baldwin keenly noted, “The paradox of education is precisely this—that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated” (para 2). In her book, *The education trap*, Christina Groeger (2021) examines the society in which students are being educated and posits a paradox of her own: “our national faith in education may be obscuring how schooling can in fact deepen economic inequality and conceal the ways in which educational merit has become a new foundation on which this inequality is justified” (p. 14). Her question calls into question the long held belief that access to education combats poverty and creates a more egalitarian society, a belief that is still very much a part of efforts to improve economic and educational equity in the United States today. Just recently, First Lady Dr. Jill Biden cited access to education and training as an important part of the Biden administration plan for recovering from the economic upheaval caused by the coronavirus pandemic (Superville, 2021). There is no doubt that the year 2020 magnified societal ills by bringing into the public consciousness the depth of racial injustice, an already undeniable disparity in wealth, and highlighting the massive tech divide. This consciousness presents an opportunity to go back in time and examine the historical genesis of long perpetuated issues of inequity. Groeger’s deep dive into the city of Boston from the late eighteenth century to the 1940s provides a particular context from which to challenge the longstanding belief that education alone can bring about change.

Groeger paints a picture of Boston and its diverse inhabitants, whose cultural, social, racial, economic, and religious identities all play a role in their paths to education and work. The main thesis: “that education became a central means of social mobility at the same moment that it became a new infrastructure for legitimizing social inequality” (p. 2), demonstrates that inequality still persists today. *The education trap* underscores the desires and good intentions of philanthropists, reformers, advocates, and even those holding political office alongside the successes and failures of the initiatives they proposed to promote equity in education and therefore society at large. Ultimately she identifies the “pernicious policy trap” that results when education alone becomes the primary means for closing economic gaps and improving people’s life chances. Using an impressive array of data from a variety of archival sources, census data, and other sources like trade journals, school records, and personal correspondence, Groeger follows the evolution of the inextricable ties between education, labor, and the economy. She demonstrates the paradox in action: while acknowledging that upward mobility was possible during this time there were also many attempts to use education to lift people out of poverty that failed. Using the benefit of hindsight, Groeger is able to identify and explain these failures, many of which point to issues of racism, sexism, and a system of merit in which the rules did not apply to all, noting that, “the growth of schools did not simply feed human capital into an autonomous economy, but actively reshaped the nature of work, the economy, and indeed, society as a whole ... the expansion of schools was a contested, political process in which some won and others lost” (p. 7). Through Groeger’s presentation of this complex history, it is not hard to connect the infrastructure put into place by the expansion of schools to the inequalities playing out daily in modern classrooms, from K-12 to higher education.

Throughout the book, the transformation of the labor market is outlined using different economic sectors to illustrate how as education expanded, two patterns emerged: attempts to elevate the status of low paying jobs through training and preparing students for industrial work met with failure while simultaneously great success was recorded in training students for professions or white collar jobs. These trends influenced the path of future education policy by solidifying for many that education was a key factor in social mobility and equity. In addition, these trends began the debate between vocational and liberal arts education which still play out in schools today.

The history of education and its direct ties to labor begin in the late nineteenth century. In Chapter 1, Groeger discusses the three distinct groups of workers in late nineteenth century Boston, noting these group divisions are mainly based on class and race and have little to do with formal education. At the time low wage or unskilled workers made up half of all wage earners and African Americans and more recent immigrants were overwhelmingly relegated to this group. Craftworkers, clerks, and proprietors of small businesses comprised the second group, who were mostly men of Irish, Canadian, German, and English descent born in the United States. The third and smallest group of workers included professionals like bankers, merchants, and large manufacturers made up of the predominantly protestant upper class or Boston Brahmins whose American roots could be traced back through generations. What these groups had in common was that work was obtained primary through family and social networks and not through education. In fact, many professions did not require any formal education at all.

Chapter 2 looks more closely at the reasons education was unsuccessful at lifting up service and manual-labor jobs through vocational or job training. Despite these failures, progressives argued that if the unskilled were skilled it would improve their standing in the job market and school enrollment for African Americans and recent immigrants climbed. Although these groups benefited from the early childhood education of kindergarten and preschool as well as classes in citizenship and the English language, schools provided little to no movement up the economic or social ladder. Chapter 3 turned its attention to workers' rights and clashes between unions and employers. As the book moves chronologically forward, Groeger describes how industry in American grew with the inclusion of new technologies such as readymade clothing and assembly line factories. During this period, employers attempted to undermine the craft unions and the lack of reputation of industrial schools or industrial education resulted in promotion of the power of white collar workers.

In the later chapters, Groeger shows how those who were school educated in this period experienced access to more and better jobs as evidenced in Chapter 4. As women, particularly second-generation immigrant women, entered the workforce as clerks, secretaries, and retail workers the connection between school and upward mobility became an accepted workforce fixture, something that continues today. However, as these new opportunities for women and immigrant workers appeared to close equity gaps a new managerial class made up of upper-class Bostonian men rose to the top of the occupational hierarchy and further perpetuated the inequities education sought to undermine. This new professional control of the labor market is exemplified in Chapter 5, using law and education as exemplars of the distribution of power and how gatekeeping and those with access to higher education were able to dominate and create hierarchies within these professions keeping others on the lower rungs of advancement. Chapter 6 continues this exemplification with a close look at business, a relatively new profession during the time. Through this example, Groeger examines gatekeeping, merit, and credentials which were used to block pathways and keep some people from the kind of work and the kind of education that could result in upward mobility thereby solidifying wealth and power for the few well into the future.

*The education trap* uses the city of Boston as a microcosm of the history of education in the United States. Groeger calls into question the strong belief that education can act as an equalizer and the best way to educational equity is more education. The book is at its best when it lifts up

its narrative voice offering anecdotes and incorporating the words and experiences of those who lived through this history. While at times I was overwhelmed with the more data driven parts of the text, the extensive data set is commendable and there are ample charts and graphs to support the transformation of education and the economic and social context that shaped its impact.

Overall, *The education trap* is an important read for anyone interested in the history of education and how it can improve our understanding of schooling and society today. It provides an enlightening read for teachers, teacher educators, researchers, and policymakers, particularly those interested in social justice, encouraging them to examine the society in which students are being educated.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131725.2021.1894068>

