



## Moving through the worlds of work: The myth of education as the great equalizer

*The education trap: Schooling and the remaking of equality in Boston*, by Cristina Viviana Groeger, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2021, 370 pp., \$35.00 (hardcover), \$19.25 (Kindle ebook), ISBN 9780674249110

Stephen S. Masyada

To cite this article: Stephen S. Masyada (2022): Moving through the worlds of work: The myth of education as the great equalizer, *Theory & Research in Social Education*, DOI: [10.1080/00933104.2022.2085025](https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2022.2085025)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2022.2085025>



Published online: 06 Jun 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 15



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

## MEDIA REVIEW

## Moving through the worlds of work: The myth of education as the great equalizer

**The education trap: Schooling and the remaking of equality in Boston**, by Cristina Viviana Groeger, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2021, 370 pp., \$35.00 (hardcover), \$19.25 (Kindle ebook), ISBN 9780674249110

In 1647, the Massachusetts Bay colony implemented the Old Deluder Satan Law. This law was the first conceptualizing public education for civic (and religious) purposes, requiring that every town with at least 50 households appoint a publicly funded teacher to help children learn to read and write, and communities double that size had to ensure that a grammar school existed. More than a century later, Benjamin Rush and Thomas Jefferson would be among the Founding Fathers to describe some form of public education as a necessary component of democratic citizenship education (though for a very narrow slice of the population, admittedly). Eventually, Horace Mann (1849), the first secretary of education in Massachusetts, established a series of public schools throughout the state, led by the belief that public schools would serve as the “great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance wheel of the social machinery” (p. 59). It is this conception of the purpose and benefit of public schools that has carried over into the conventional wisdom of the present day, at least among the general public. But should it? In *The Education Trap: Schooling and the Remaking of Equality in Boston*, Cristina Viviana Groeger suggests that the answer is far more complex than we think.

### Overview

In six well-researched and detailed chapters, Groeger works to deconstruct the Mann myth of schools as the great equalizer. The author’s sources are extensive and well-cited. They include newspaper articles and editorials from both national and Boston newspapers; archival interviews from a variety of people that cut across class lines; census and other demographic data; and multiple local, state, and national reports on work, schooling, and income. Focusing on Boston between about 1880 and 1940, Groeger presents an image of schooling vastly at odds with that pre-conceived notion of the “great equalizer.” Rather, public education served to ultimately reshape the very nature of society. Indeed, one of the core themes of her research is that the introduction of the idea that mandatory public education as it is often conceived served to weaken the power of the laboring classes and traditional craftwork occupations. Within this conception of the public school, and later higher education, the diploma served as a gatekeeper to social mobility and, ultimately, equality. At the same time, public schools provided lip service to the importance of economic, racial, and social equality while instead continuing to reinforce the expectations of the business and industry elite.

That is not to say that public education did not provide opportunity for economic or social advancement. Groeger presents well-researched qualitative and quantitative evidence, with numerous charts and graphs embedded throughout the chapters, that show that, for at least some residents of Boston, education provided the opportunity to move through the worlds of work into the middle class. Vocational education struggled to find its place in an environment

where skilled craft unions were declining, and industrial laborers, especially new immigrants and African Americans, saw little benefit to such a system. Instead, what we today consider traditional schooling was perceived as a path toward respectability for women, working-class students, and the children of immigrants. Yet, even here, the myth of the great equalizer breaks down. As greater numbers of Bostonians joined the white-collar work force, the Boston Brahmins, the elite of the elites who ultimately dictated policy and society, facilitated the introduction of credentialing. The new gatekeeper would not be universal public schooling; rather, it would be the college degree and the professional certification. By the early 20th century, the elite colleges and universities in the Boston area, supported by the wealthy and powerful, would ensure that the appropriate individuals filled the most lucrative career pathways.

In this review, I will explore each chapter and consider the changing “ways of work” and how they interact with and are influenced by a variety of factors, including education. Each chapter, as the reader will see, works toward challenging Mann’s traditional and meritocratic myth of schools as the great equalizer. This book presents a different approach to thinking about the ways in which social mobility and education may have been impacted by demographic factors, gated opportunities, and the labor versus capital dichotomy.

## Chapter one

The first chapter, “Nineteenth Century Networks,” explores the “worlds of work” that reflected late 19th century Boston (and serves as an ongoing unifying theme throughout the book). Within these worlds was a clear class divide. The low wage workers, primarily recent immigrants and African Americans engaged as day laborers or similar occupations, comprised almost half of the workforce. The second world of work was more skilled; these were those with a craft skill or who ran a small shop that provided a particular service. The Bostonians within that world were predominately White and native born, though one might find scattered immigrants of Western European or Canadian extraction. The final world of work was comprised of the smallest percentage of the population but also the most influential: the upper class of the “professional” trades. These were the large merchants, lawyers, and other professionals, whose mores and goals were shaped by the elite Boston Brahmins, the wealthiest residents of the city and some of the most powerful families in the country. Within these worlds of work, racial, ethnic, religious, and economic stratification served as a means to regulate jobs and, thus, opportunity.

Chapter One explores these worlds of work and the ways in which they interacted. The networks formed within these worlds, and between them, would facilitate pathways to social mobility or stifle them. Interestingly, this chapter provides strong evidence that our traditional notion of public schooling as a path toward careers and work was not something that reflected the reality of 19th century Boston life; who you were and who you knew was far more impactful. Yet, Groeger argues that changing demographics, the growing power of Americanized immigrant communities, and new types of industry and opportunity presented challenges that the elites of Boston had to address: how do we ensure that we remain on top? Public schooling and later higher education, by the early 20th century, would serve as a means to better control career and work pathways hand-in-hand with the traditional networks from the old worlds of work.

## Chapter two

Chapter Two, “Uplifting the Unskilled,” begins the process of exploring just how public schooling reinforced the social order while also providing Bostonians of all classes a perception of education as a means of both social mobility and social reform. The chapter opens by drawing on some of the fantastic census data Groeger has integrated throughout the book, illustrating the

path of the Irish-born Ahearn family from the low-wage world of work into the more skilled world of the white-collar workforce. Public schooling played a role in the path toward the middle class, though not necessarily how progressive reformers envisioned it. Indeed, efforts to implement occupational education programs to better prepare low wage workers struggled to find an audience; why take classes that would simply help you do your low wage job better rather than classes that would provide opportunity for advancement, if not for you, then for your children? As occupational/vocational coursework failed to gain a foothold, schooling that emphasized more traditional classroom subjects expanded and thrived. Groeger explores this contrast quite well. The sometimes incredulous reactions of progressive reformers that she describes, as they struggle to understand why these programs could not find an audience, is a pattern that is still seen today. It reminds one of the ways in which well-meaning, but poorly conceived, educational reforms often collapse in the face of a resistant public, groupthink, or sheer mismanagement and low expectations (Gustavussen, 2018; Kingsbury, 2022). Ultimately, despite increasing enrollments in Boston schools, the three worlds of work continued to reflect the mid 19th century stratified economic system.

### Chapter three

As Groeger wraps up discussion of the struggles of unskilled labor and efforts at public schooling, she transitions in the third chapter to “Craft Power in the Industrial Workplace.” This chapter paints a picture of labor-oriented skilled crafts education fighting a losing battle in a changing industrial, demographic, economic, and political environment. Interestingly, Groeger paints a picture of struggling craft worker-oriented education as going hand-in-hand with the decline of craft worker-oriented unions. This decline was reflected in the ways in which these unions lost control of entry-level vocational education. The rise of industrial unions and employer-operated (and designed) training programs furthered capital-driven agendas and standardized training; everything from the garment industry to construction moved toward an employer driven, factory oriented model.

This changing landscape contributed to the struggle of vocational industrial education to gain a permanent presence in Boston public schools. Labor unions viewed industrial education as their own prerogative to ensure both wages and union strength. Employers saw company-run training programs and the basic education provided by public schools as a means to reduce the influence of those same labor unions.

### Chapter four

One of the more enjoyable aspects of Groeger’s book is the way she traces the role that demographic changes had on both Boston public schools and on the worlds of work. In Chapter Four, “Becoming Pink Collar,” she explores the growth of business training in public schools—the types of training that prepared students for white collar jobs as teachers, stenographers, secretaries, and accounting clerks. Where vocational education for craft work failed to gain a foothold in public schools, commercial or business education cemented itself into the traditional high school model as an important means of preparing young and upwardly mobile Bostonians for a new world of work. Both official and informal partnerships between local communities and private business facilitated the growth of this sort of education. However, this upward mobility was not without its limitations. African-Americans, despite a passionate pursuit of education, often remained relegated to the world of low wage work. As older immigrant groups, such as the Irish and Italians, transitioned into greater levels of wealth and power, newer immigrant groups from Eastern Europe and

elsewhere took their place within the lower worlds of work. They became the new laborers, domestics, and unskilled factory workers. In this chapter, Groeger also calls attention to growing gender-based inequities within professions, a pattern that remains familiar more than a century later.

At the same time, as women increasingly filled the white-collar positions that made corporate life possible, so too was there a changing perception of the importance of public schooling. There was a growing effort on the part of women to both provide and seek opportunities for better education, and the next two chapters explore the ways in which women tried to use public education to move through the worlds of work. As Groeger ably demonstrates, however, this changing perception on the importance of education would serve as a means of maintaining class distinctions. Schools would serve as both the gatekeeper and the path builder. A generally standardized curriculum to provide K-12 students a path toward fulfilling their roles in the world of work would come to dominate our public schools. At the same time, however, the high school diploma would no longer be the most important credential someone could earn. Higher education would become the new gatekeeper; to ensure social mobility, one would have to seek better credentials. Thus, new credentials and even more schooling would be necessary to transition through the worlds of work.

## Chapters five and six

This idea of the importance of the credential is at the core of the fifth and sixth chapters. Both chapters paint a picture of how perceptions about the fields of law, education, and business were shaped by the rise of the credential and the increasing importance of higher education beyond public high school. For clarification, the term “credential” as used by Groeger and in this review generally refers to a certified demonstration of learning and schooling, which is most commonly presented as a diploma or similar certificate from an educational institution or training program. These credentials, as noted elsewhere, serve as both a gatekeeper and path maker, depending on where it is from.

Chapter Five, “Professional Ladders,” explores the ways in which both law and education transitioned into credentialed fields. Not surprisingly, considering the theme of the book, both of these fields found new ways to continue some version of the old worlds of work. For example, while teaching became increasingly feminized, school administration remained predominately the province of men. The ability of the elites, whether old Boston Brahmins or newer members of the gilded class, to control entry into the white/pink collar professions ultimately was limited by broad popular support for more accessible credentialing opportunities like Boston’s Teacher College and Suffolk Law. Groeger points out, however, that “The graduates of distinct schools entered different rungs on the professional ladder. As each school consolidated its niche along this ladder, the distance between rungs grew greater” (p. 212). White Protestant men went to Harvard and became educational administrators and wealthy lawyers, and those old networks Groeger discussed in Chapter Two once again emerge as a means to smooth the path for these credentialed graduates of the elite institutions. Women and everyone else without that White, male, Protestant, networked background went to a normal school or Suffolk Law. Even then, credentialing through professional associations limited the ability of the woman or children of immigrants to do such things as practice law. Bar associations, unfortunately, did an excellent job in limiting the types of legal work women could do. The work of Jewish and Irish lawyers, who were often educated in lower cost law schools, was derided as less than adequate. In this sense then, the upward mobility provided by professional ladders helped only a select few through the worlds of work.

This same idea holds true when considering the ways in which corporate Boston was shaped by the start of World War II. In many ways, it is here that the network model, in conjunction with the growth and prominence of elite higher education, served as a method of ensuring that the right people climbed that professional ladder into the corner offices of the corporation. Chapter Six, “Placement in Corporate America,” explores this nature and impact of schooling, as well as the almost incestuous ways in which higher education and business collaborated in establishing degree programs and credentials that would serve as gatekeepers to entry. The more niche the credential, the easier it would be to limit those who gain it. Even here, there was a reinforcement of the old worlds of work. Secretarial programs at Boston University, Simmons, or other four-year degree and credential granting institutions promised a path into the elite, but they still required a connection to networks that would be inaccessible to the average ambitious Bostonian. Even as women, immigrants, and African-Americans pursued the promise of schooling and higher education as a path toward the corporate boardroom, “Credentials and placement services ran up against the limits of the corporate hierarchy set by those with the most power” (p. 247).

## Recommendation

This book is engaging and well researched. Groeger drills down into historical census micro-data over a 60-year span covering the late 19th through the early 20th centuries. The provided charts and graphs are well-illustrated and easy to interpret, and they lend themselves well in support of additional research. This micro-data is supported by an incredibly rich number of qualitative sources, from the *Boston Globe* and other newspaper editorials, articles, and letters to various journals, diaries, reports, and archival interviews across a broad section of Bostonians. These broad and well-integrated sources complement her easy and enjoyable writing style. They are well-integrated into the broader thesis of the book, which presents a powerful and convincing critique of the traditional perception of public education. I was most reminded of David Tyack’s (1974) tome, *One Best System: A History of American Urban Education*, which covers a similar time frame and explores the rise of the progressive educational reformer and the centralization of the urban school. Groeger’s book, in some ways, serves as an admirable and highly researched update of Tyack’s work. It also serves as an interesting companion piece to the collection of essays in the recent *Public Education: Defending a Cornerstone of American Democracy* (Berliner & Hermanns, 2022), which provides a wide variety of perspectives on the role of public schools and the ways in which they do or do not serve as Mann’s “great equalizer.”

Groeger paints a vivid picture of education, industry, and economic disparities within Boston between 1880 and 1940, and the implications for the present are clear. Whereas public schools, and then four-year institutions, served as gatekeepers and credentialing agents within the worlds of work, today’s access is limited by the post-graduate credential. As Groeger notes, “half of college graduates have not experienced wage growth since 2000, and a college degree is not a guarantee of a stable well paying job” (p. 255). Even with those post-graduate degrees, with the concomitant credentials and a perceived path toward the elite, one need only consider the growing social and economic burden of student loan debt to wonder whether the economic benefit is ultimately worth it (Tran et al., 2018). Ultimately, *The Education Trap: Schooling and the Remaking of Equality in Boston* is a worthwhile read and provides a powerful rejoinder to the long-running myth of schooling as the great equalizer. After reading this book, the reader might find themselves wondering about the nature of public schooling today. Has it even ultimately changed from what Groeger calls the worlds of work? How could Mann have gotten it so wrong? A book that leaves us with such questions is one worth reading.

## References

- Berliner, D. C., & Hermanns, C. (Eds.). (2022). *Public education: Defending a cornerstone of American democracy*. Teachers College Press.
- Gustavussen, M. L. (2018). Contending with school reform: Neoliberal restructuring, racial politics, and resistance in post-Katrina New Orleans. *Focaal*, 2018(82), 94–108. <https://doi.org/10.3167/fcl.2018.820107>
- Kingsbury, I. (2022). Demystifying goliath: An examination of the political compass of education reform. *Journal of School Choice*, 16(2), 258–274. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15582159.2021.2004491>
- Mann, H. (1849). *Twelfth annual report of the secretary of the board of education 1848*. Dutton and Wentworth.
- Tran, A. G., Mintert, J. S., Llamas, J. D., & Lam, C. K. (2018). At what costs? Student loan debt, debt stress, and racially/ethnically diverse college students' perceived health. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 24(4), 459–469. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000207>
- Tyack, D. B. (1974). *The one best system: A history of American urban education*. Harvard University Press.

Stephen S. Masyada  
University of Central Florida  
 [Stephen.Masyada@ucf.edu](mailto:Stephen.Masyada@ucf.edu)

© 2022 College and University Faculty Assembly of National Council for the Social Studies  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00933104.2022.2085025>

