

The education trap: Schools and the remaking of inequality in Boston

By Cristina Viviana Groeger, Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 2021. ISBN: 9780674249110

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The Education Trap: Schools and the Remaking of Inequality in Boston opens with a paradox: Education is lauded as “the great equalizer” of economic disparities, but in the United States, access to education and economic inequality have climbed steadily side by side (p. 1). Cristina Groeger’s thoroughly researched and lucidly written book seeks to explore and explicate this paradox through a history of schooling and its ties to work, in Boston, Massachusetts. The book begins in the 1880s with a portrait of a Boston shaped by class and ethnic divides and ends in the 1940s with a portrait of a Boston shaped by class, ethnic, and educational divides. Groeger introduces a range of characters and major actors in the debates over education, vocation, and economic and gender inequality over time. She draws on a wealth of sources from census data¹ to school proceedings, local newspaper articles, university yearbooks, conference and professional society documents, and numerous secondary sources to craft her argument about the education paradox and the resultant education trap. Overall, Groeger shows a compelling story of how education policy has not been a silver bullet remediating social, economic, and workplace inequality, but rather part of a long history of the “education trap” in which elite interests continually prevail and inequalities are reproduced.

The six book chapters are organized in two broad sections: the first lays out the history of training for labor and craftwork and the second the history of education for the professions. Both sections follow a generally chronological path in parallel. Education during the 1880s–1940s is the focus in analytic response to the economic growth and change in the country during those years. Chapter one, “Nineteenth Century Networks,” lays out the structures of society and work in late 19th century Boston. Chapter two, “Uplifting the Unskilled,” follows reform efforts to train and upskill low-wage workers, emphasizing the narrative of the individual work ethic and the importance placed on skill by reformers. The third chapter, “Craft Power in the Industrial Workplace,” highlights the conflict between organized labor and craft unions and employers who were attempting to undermine unions and shift the locus of training from union apprenticeships to employer programs. These opening chapters describe the landscape of schooling and household, industrial and craft labor in Boston, 1880–1940.

The second half of the book turns to education and training for “white collar” work. While the first half of the book includes gendered analysis of workplace demographics, the fourth chapter delves more specifically into the gendered politics of both education and work, tracing the story of women workers in “Becoming Pink Collar.” The final two chapters delve more deeply into education as an avenue into the professions and the gendering of expertise and management. “Professional Ladders” explicates the development of teacher and lawyer education, and “Placement in Corporate America” dives into the history of business schools. These chapters together outline how the “business training” revolution of the late 1800s through mid-1900s transformed public high schools into vocational schools for white collar jobs, changing industrial hierarchies, gender equity, and perceptions of social mobility in the process.

Implicit across chapters in the book are ongoing debates about the meaning and purpose of education for citizenship, vocation, profession, and social change. A theme throughout the book is that the best laid plans of reformers, union activists, and local politicians to increase access to schooling and training continually go awry while the priorities of elite institutions, successful businesses, and the longstanding elite Bostonian families are consistently met. Groeger's history smartly shows, through the mismatch between the schooling efforts of eager reformers and the actions of low-wage workers, how education policy did not always meet the actual needs of Bostonians. At the same time, the success of education at opening doors for certain groups—primarily white women and some immigrants—shows how the myth of education as the great equalizer continues to build steam across the decades. Much of the book details the desires of employers and the way that education came to stand in for status and fitness to work. At the same time, Groeger demonstrates how non-academic credentials from personality and social network to gender, ethnicity, class, and religion mediated access to education and work.

Groeger traces gender and ethnic disparities across schooling and work throughout the book, with chapter four most explicitly dedicated to the relationship between gender and the structure of both institutions and occupations. "Becoming Pink Collar" explores the ways that young women in the early 20th century used education to enter "white collar" workplaces as office and sales workers. She argues that this flood of women into the professions created a new hierarchy of work, in which salesclerks, bookkeepers, stenographers, and clerical work became "pink collar." These "pink collar" workers were, in wages paid and authority allotted, forever subordinate to the managerial class of "white collar" men. These "pink collar" women workers remained in their positions in perpetuity, while young college-educated men jumped onto the ladder of promotion and corporate success.

In chapter five, Groeger illustrates how he struggle over training and credentialing for education and legal practice reconfigured access to the professions and reinforced hierarchies. For example, the Harvard Graduate School of Education restructured its training programs by offering different graduate degrees to ensure that men were credentialed for school leadership positions while women were credentialed to teach only the youngest children. In another example, Groeger illustrates how male attorneys organized professionally to delegitimize women lawyers. Even after women were allowed access to some law schools, they were shuttled into "feminine" areas of the profession, such as juvenile cases. Groeger presents much of this process as a response to the "feminization" of institutions and occupations as girls and women increasingly gained access to education and work. Furthermore, the book shows that white women were able to reap economic and professional benefits from ongoing reform actions, while immigrant and Black women were continually excluded. The benefits for white women added to the dominant narrative that education would forward economic opportunity, but the history shown here adds further texture to the long history of class and racial divides among women entering the professional workforce.

One limitation of the book in the context of gender studies is its uncritical use of the term "feminization" as a descriptor of changes in the workplace. While her use of data and visualizations to represent the gender shifts in schooling and work are impressive, the question of feminization could use richer qualitative and theoretical grounding. The book presents feminization as the increase of women in a specific work field, but the critical commentary about this phenomenon is limited. The book would benefit from a more textured discussion of the topic, as is visible in a very compelling passage describing the Harvard Graduate School of Education's restructuring of admissions to limit women students. This restructuring is illustrated by the school dean's belief that the reputation of the school was proportional to its number of male students (p. 200). Such commentary helps to contextualize and specify the idea of "feminization" and its role in shaping institutional and occupational status. The same need for criticality could be suggested about the term "pink collar," given the changing nature of gendered, classed and racialized labor throughout history. Future studies in the relationship between education and gendered work could further clarify the impact of race and ethnicity as other vectors shaping the sociocultural response to women in schools and at work. There is also space to consider the history of disability justice and access to both education and the workplace in movements to increase equity for disabled people.

This book holds merit in both historical and contemporary conversations about the meaning of schooling, its relationship to work, and the growth of the structures underlying professional education and education for work.

Groeger does tell the story of Boston's public primary and secondary schools and of the schooling of children and teens for work. Through this history, schooling for youth is influenced by institutions of higher education—led by Harvard, which dominates in the US context and holds weight internationally—which come to define the social structures of work and the professions. In a contemporary conversation with books such as Tressie McMillan Cottom's *Lower Ed* (2017), elite institutions such as Harvard's many attempts to maintain higher educational primacy saw other schools and modes of learning (and their graduates) rise and sink in status depending on their similarity to the Harvard model. To that end, this book is also of use to those interested in questions of elitism, expertise, and merit in the education system and then in the workplace, as these issues are negotiated by actors throughout the history told here, from union organizers to admissions committees. This book particularly could add further context to studies of gender and organizations such as Marianna Fotaki and Nancy Harding's book *Gender and the Organization: Women at Work in the 21st Century* (2017) by drawing further consideration to the way that credentialing through schooling impacts gendered access to and then experiences of organizations and how education can at times “trap” individuals inside gendered, classed work. Finally, the book opens questions about the gendered and racialized experiences of students in elite institutions of higher education, pairing well with books like *Yale Needs Women: How the First Group of Girls Rewrote the Rules of an Ivy League Giant* (2021) by Anne Gardiner Perkins.

Although *The Education Trap: Schools and the Remaking of Inequality in Boston* opens with a paradox, it ends with a clear call to reconceptualize the history and present relationship between education and worker power. The education trap describes how, while education is lauded throughout this time in history (and into the present) as a solution to economic inequality for different groups, the US education system in fact works to reproduce the very inequalities that it is intended to reduce. Groeger uses her case study of Boston to emphasize the mythic nature of merit and the education ladder to success as part of challenging the paradox of the trap. While the gender analysis in the book could benefit from greater criticality, it also serves to emphasize the importance of attending to racial and gendered outcomes of movements for equity in education and training for the workplace and the need to seek worker justice and improved working conditions alongside efforts to increase educational equity. Groeger's closing conclusion—that the historical transition away from craft labor to an economy based on school training created a new system of inequality—calls for continued attention to the assumptions underpinning scholarship, social policy, and activism for greater economic equality.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

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ENDNOTE

¹ Groeger uses several types of census data from US history, including the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series, an anonymized digitized dataset of US census data 1880–1940; for Groeger's explanation of her use of census data and mixed-methods research in the book, see Groeger, Cristina V. (2021). “Using Census Data in Historical Research.” <https://tinagroeger.com/educationtrap-using-data>.

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