



Education and Social Mobility: A Critical Analysis of Inequality's Impact

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Abstract:

This paper critically examines the relationship between education and social mobility, with a focus on the impact of inequality on this dynamic. Despite education's touted potential as a great equalizer, research suggests that its ability to facilitate social mobility is compromised by entrenched inequalities. This paper explores how structural barriers, such as socioeconomic status, race, and gender, limit access to quality education and subsequently constrain social mobility. Through a critical analysis of existing literature, this paper reveals how inequality perpetuates a cycle of disadvantage, where marginalized groups are denied equal opportunities for educational attainment and subsequent social mobility. The paper also examines the ways in which education systems can perpetuate inequality, often unwittingly reinforcing existing power dynamics. Furthermore, this paper discusses potential solutions to address these inequalities, including policy interventions, educational reforms, and community-based initiatives. By highlighting the complex interplay between education and social mobility, this paper aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the ways in which inequality undermines the potential for education to serve as a vehicle for social mobility. Ultimately, this paper argues that addressing inequality is crucial to realizing education's potential to promote social mobility and create a more just and equitable society. By critically examining the relationship between education and social mobility, this paper seeks to inform strategies that can help mitigate the impact of inequality and promote greater social mobility for all.

Keywords: Educational Inequality, Social Mobility, Systemic Barriers, Equity in Education, Inclusive Education.,

I. Introduction

Education is often touted as a key driver of social mobility, offering individuals the skills, knowledge, and credentials necessary to improve their socioeconomic status. However, this narrative overlooks the ways in which inequality can compromise the ability of education to deliver on this promise. Structural barriers, such as socioeconomic status, race, and gender, can limit access to quality education, perpetuating cycles of disadvantage and constraining social mobility.

The relationship between education and social mobility is complex and influenced by a range of factors, including policy, pedagogy, and power dynamics. Despite education's potential to promote social mobility, it can also reinforce existing inequalities, often unwittingly perpetuating the very social and economic disparities it seeks to address. This paper seeks to explore this critical issue, examining the ways in which

inequality undermines the potential for education to serve as a vehicle for social mobility and identifying potential solutions to address these inequalities.

Background on education and social mobility

Education has long been considered a key driver of social mobility, offering individuals the skills, knowledge, and credentials necessary to improve their socioeconomic status. The idea that education can serve as a great equalizer, providing opportunities for individuals to overcome socioeconomic disadvantage, is deeply ingrained in modern societies. However, research has shown that the relationship between education and social mobility is more complex, with structural barriers and systemic inequalities limiting access to quality education and subsequent social mobility.

Historically, education has played a critical role in promoting social mobility, particularly in industrialized societies. The expansion of education systems and increased access to higher education have contributed to increased social mobility, enabling individuals to acquire skills and knowledge that enhance their employability and earning potential. However, in recent years, concerns have grown about the ability of education systems to promote social mobility, particularly in the context of rising income inequality, shrinking social mobility, and persistent achievement gaps. As a result, there is a growing need to re-examine the relationship between education and social mobility, and to identify strategies that can help address the systemic inequalities that limit access to quality education and subsequent social mobility.

Importance of examining inequality's impact

The importance of examining inequality's impact on education and social mobility cannot be overstated. It is essential to understand how structural barriers and systemic inequalities limit access to quality education and subsequent social mobility, as this knowledge is crucial for developing effective strategies to promote greater social mobility, reduce inequality, and foster more inclusive and equitable societies.

Examining inequality's impact is also vital for addressing the perpetuation of poverty, social exclusion, and economic disadvantage. By understanding how inequality undermines social mobility, stakeholders can develop targeted solutions to break cycles of disadvantage, promote greater social cohesion, and create a more just and equitable society. This, in turn, can have far-reaching benefits, including improved health outcomes, increased economic growth, and a more informed and engaged citizenry. Ultimately, examining inequality's impact is a critical step towards creating a society that values and supports the well-being and success of all its members.

Examining the impact of inequality on education and social mobility is crucial for several reasons:

- i. Understanding Complex Dynamics:* Investigating how structural barriers and systemic inequalities limit access to quality education and subsequent social mobility helps us understand the complex dynamics that shape individual and societal outcomes.
- ii. Identifying Leverage Points:* By examining inequality's impact, researchers and policymakers can identify key leverage points for intervention and reform, ultimately developing effective strategies to promote greater social mobility and reduce inequality.

Addressing Perpetuation of Disadvantage

Examining inequality's impact is also critical for addressing the perpetuation of poverty, social exclusion, and economic disadvantage:

- i. Breaking Cycles of Disadvantage:* When marginalized groups are denied equal opportunities for educational attainment and subsequent social mobility, they are more likely to experience poverty, poor

health, and social isolation. By understanding inequality's impact, stakeholders can develop targeted solutions to break these cycles of disadvantage.

ii. Promoting Social Cohesion: By addressing inequality's impact, we can promote greater social cohesion and create a more just and equitable society for all, where everyone has access to the resources and opportunities they need to thrive.

II. The Relationship Between Education and Social Mobility

The relationship between education and social mobility is a complex and dynamic one, influenced by a range of factors that can either enhance or diminish the impact of education on social mobility. On the one hand, education can provide individuals with the skills, knowledge, and credentials necessary to access better-paying jobs and improve their socioeconomic status. However, the quality and type of education, as well as the social and economic context in which it is accessed, can significantly impact its effectiveness as a vehicle for social mobility.

Despite the potential of education to drive social mobility, a range of structural and systemic barriers can limit its impact. For example, disparities in access to quality education, unequal funding and resources, and biases in curriculum and pedagogy can all perpetuate existing inequalities and limit opportunities for marginalized groups. Furthermore, the increasing cost of higher education and the resulting student debt can also constrain social mobility, making it more difficult for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds to access the education and training they need to succeed.

Overview of the Role of Education in Social Mobility

Education plays a crucial role in social mobility, serving as a key driver of individual and societal progress. Its impact can be seen in several ways:

i. Skill development: Education equips individuals with the skills, knowledge, and competencies necessary to access better-paying jobs and improve their socioeconomic status.

ii. Socialization: Education shapes values, attitudes, and social norms, influencing how individuals interact with others and navigate social structures.

iii. Credentialing: Educational qualifications serve as a gateway to employment, higher education, and other opportunities, often determining access to resources and social networks.

iv. Mobility pathways: Education provides a means for individuals to transition from one social class to another, potentially breaking cycles of poverty and disadvantage.

v. Inequality reduction: Education can help reduce social and economic inequalities by providing marginalized groups with access to opportunities and resources.

However, the relationship between education and social mobility is complex, and its impact can be influenced by various factors, including:

i. Quality and accessibility: Disparities in access to quality education can limit its effectiveness in driving social mobility.

ii. Structural barriers: Systemic inequalities, biases, and discriminatory practices can constrain educational outcomes and social mobility.

iii. Individual circumstances: Personal background, socioeconomic status, and other factors can affect the extent to which education translates into social mobility.

Overall, education has the potential to drive social mobility, but its impact depends on various factors, and addressing systemic inequalities and barriers is crucial to maximizing its effect.

Theoretical frameworks: meritocracy, cultural capital, and social reproduction

Meritocracy

- Assumes that education is a fair and equalizing force, where individual talent and effort determine success
- Posits that education provides opportunities for social mobility based on merit, regardless of background or social status

Criticisms:

- Ignores structural barriers and inequalities
- Overlooks the role of privilege and cultural capital
- Fosters individual blame for lack of success

Cultural Capital

- Pierre Bourdieu's concept: cultural capital refers to the cultural knowledge, skills, and dispositions that confer social advantage
- Highlights how education perpetuates inequality by valuing dominant cultural capital, marginalizing others

Key aspects:

- Cultural capital is unequally distributed
- Education reinforces dominant cultural capital
- Cultural capital shapes access to resources and opportunities

Social Reproduction

- Examines how education reproduces existing social inequalities and power relations
- Argues that education maintains social order by:
 - Transmitting dominant values and ideologies
 - Preparing students for their destined social roles
 - Legitimizing existing power structures

Critiques:

- Education perpetuates inequality by reinforcing dominant groups' interests
- Fosters social control and conformity

These frameworks offer critical perspectives on the complex relationships between education, social mobility, and inequality, highlighting the need to address structural barriers and cultural biases to promote greater social justice.

III. Dimensions of Educational Inequality

Educational inequality is a multidimensional issue, encompassing a range of factors that intersect and compound to affect students' learning experiences and outcomes. One key dimension is the unequal distribution of resources, including funding, technology, and qualified teachers, which can significantly impact the quality of education received by students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Furthermore, systemic barriers such as discriminatory policies, biased curriculum, and inadequate support services can also perpetuate educational inequality, limiting opportunities for marginalized groups.

Another critical dimension of educational inequality is the cultural and social capital that students bring to the learning environment. Students from dominant cultural groups often possess cultural capital that aligns with the dominant culture of the school, providing them with an unfair advantage in terms of access to resources, social networks, and academic opportunities. In contrast, students from marginalized groups may face cultural and linguistic barriers that hinder their ability to navigate the education system, leading to unequal outcomes and limited social mobility. By recognizing and addressing these dimensions of educational inequality, educators and policymakers can work towards creating a more equitable and inclusive learning environment.

Socioeconomic status and access to quality education

Socioeconomic status (SES) plays a significant role in determining access to quality education. Individuals from higher SES backgrounds tend to have greater access to resources, networks, and opportunities that enable them to attend top-performing schools, receive high-quality instruction, and participate in enrichment activities. In contrast, those from lower SES backgrounds often face barriers such as inadequate funding, limited access to technology, and fewer opportunities for advanced coursework, making it more challenging to access quality education.

The consequences of this disparity are far-reaching, perpetuating cycles of poverty and limiting social mobility. Students from lower SES backgrounds are more likely to experience teacher shortages, outdated textbooks, and inadequate facilities, ultimately affecting their academic achievement and future prospects. Moreover, the stress and instability associated with poverty can impact cognitive development, mental health, and academic motivation, further exacerbating the achievement gap. Addressing the systemic inequalities that limit access to quality education is crucial for promoting greater equity and social mobility.

Racial and ethnic disparities in educational outcomes

Racial and ethnic disparities in educational outcomes persist in many countries, with marginalized groups facing significant barriers to academic success. Students from Black, Hispanic, Indigenous, and Asian backgrounds often experience lower graduation rates, lower academic achievement, and higher rates of discipline and suspension compared to their White peers. These disparities are rooted in systemic inequalities, including biases in curriculum and pedagogy, lack of representation and cultural responsiveness, and inadequate support services.

The consequences of these disparities are far-reaching, perpetuating cycles of inequality and limiting social mobility. Students who experience poor educational outcomes are more likely to face unemployment, poverty, and incarceration, while also being underrepresented in higher education and the workforce. Addressing these disparities requires a comprehensive approach that includes culturally responsive teaching, targeted support services, and policies that address systemic inequalities. By promoting greater equity and inclusion in education, we can work towards a more just and equitable society for all.

Gender differences in educational attainment and career choices

1. Gender disparities in educational attainment

Gender disparities in educational attainment are evident in various aspects of education. While girls and women have made significant strides in achieving academic success, they still face barriers in certain subjects and fields. For instance, girls tend to perform better in language arts and social sciences, while boys tend to excel in mathematics and science. However, these disparities are not inherent, but rather a result of societal expectations, stereotypes, and biases that influence students' interests and choices.

2. Gender differences in subject choice and career aspirations

Gender differences in subject choice and career aspirations are shaped by societal expectations and stereotypes. From a young age, boys are often encouraged to pursue careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), while girls are often steered towards arts, humanities, and social sciences. These differences can limit career opportunities and perpetuate gender segregation in the workforce. For example, women are underrepresented in STEM fields, which are often high-paying and in-demand careers. By challenging these stereotypes and biases, we can encourage more girls and women to pursue careers in these fields.

3. Influence of societal expectations and stereotypes

Societal expectations and stereotypes significantly influence gender differences in educational attainment and career choices. These expectations and stereotypes can limit students' interests, choices, and opportunities. For instance, girls may be discouraged from pursuing careers in STEM fields due to stereotypes that these fields are masculine domains. Similarly, boys may be encouraged to pursue careers in traditionally masculine fields, such as engineering or finance, rather than exploring other options. By recognizing and challenging these expectations and stereotypes, we can promote greater gender equality in education and career choices.

4. Impact of gender bias in education and the workplace

Gender bias in education and the workplace has a significant impact on gender differences in educational attainment and career choices. Bias can manifest in various ways, including discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion. For example, girls and women may face bias in the classroom, with teachers and peers perpetuating stereotypes and biases. Similarly, women may face bias in the workplace, with limited opportunities for advancement and unequal pay. By addressing and eliminating gender bias, we can create more inclusive and equitable environments that promote gender equality.

5. Strategies for promoting gender equality in education and career choices

Promoting gender equality in education and career choices requires a multifaceted approach. Strategies include challenging stereotypes and biases, providing role models and mentorship, and creating inclusive and supportive learning environments. Additionally, educators and policymakers can implement policies and programs that promote gender equality, such as gender-neutral curriculum, single-sex education, and career guidance programs. By working together, we can create a more equitable and inclusive society that values and supports the educational and career aspirations of all individuals, regardless of gender.

IV. Consequences of Educational Inequality on Social Mobility

Educational inequality has severe consequences that extend beyond the classroom, significantly impacting social mobility. Unequal access to quality education perpetuates cycles of disadvantage, limiting

opportunities for marginalized groups and reinforcing social hierarchies. As a result, individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds often face reduced career prospects, lower earning potential, and decreased social status.

The consequences of educational inequality on social mobility are far-reaching, affecting not only individuals but also society as a whole. Reduced social mobility can lead to increased income inequality, decreased economic growth, and social unrest. Furthermore, educational inequality can perpetuate systemic injustices, limiting opportunities for marginalized groups and reinforcing existing power structures. Addressing educational inequality is crucial to promoting greater social mobility and creating a more equitable society.

Limited opportunities for upward mobility

1. Barriers to Upward Mobility

Barriers to upward mobility refer to the obstacles that prevent individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds from improving their socio-economic status. These barriers can be structural, institutional, or societal, and they limit access to resources, opportunities, and social networks that are essential for upward mobility. Barriers can include lack of access to quality education, job training, and healthcare, as well as discriminatory practices and biases that prevent individuals from fully participating in society.

2. Unequal Access to Quality Education and Job Training

Unequal access to quality education and job training is a significant barrier to upward mobility. Individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds often attend underfunded schools, have limited access to job training programs, and lack exposure to career opportunities. This limits their ability to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to compete for better-paying jobs and advance in their careers. Furthermore, unequal access to education and job training perpetuates cycles of poverty, as individuals are unable to break free from low-wage jobs and limited career prospects.

3. Limited Networking Opportunities

Limited networking opportunities are another barrier to upward mobility. Individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds often lack access to professional networks, mentorship, and social connections that can provide valuable advice, job leads, and career advancement opportunities. This limits their ability to navigate complex career landscapes and access job opportunities that are not advertised publicly. Furthermore, limited networking opportunities perpetuate social isolation, making it difficult for individuals to access resources, support, and guidance that can aid in their career advancement.

4. Systemic Biases and Discriminatory Practices

Systemic biases and discriminatory practices are deeply ingrained in institutions and societal structures, perpetuating barriers to upward mobility. These biases can include racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism, among others, and they limit access to resources, opportunities, and social networks. Systemic biases and discriminatory practices can also lead to unequal treatment in education, employment, and healthcare, further entrenching cycles of poverty and limiting social mobility.

5. Consequences of Limited Opportunities for Upward Mobility

The consequences of limited opportunities for upward mobility are far-reaching and devastating. Individuals who face barriers to upward mobility are more likely to experience poverty, poor health outcomes, and social isolation. Limited opportunities for upward mobility also perpetuate cycles of poverty, as individuals are

unable to break free from low-wage jobs and limited career prospects. Furthermore, limited opportunities for upward mobility can lead to social unrest, decreased economic growth, and erosion of trust in institutions. Addressing these limitations is crucial to promoting greater social mobility and creating a more equitable society.

Perpetuation of poverty and social exclusion

1. Perpetuation of Poverty

The perpetuation of poverty is a direct consequence of limited opportunities for upward mobility. When individuals face barriers to education, job training, and career advancement, they are unable to break free from low-wage jobs and limited career prospects. This perpetuates cycles of poverty, as individuals are unable to earn a living wage, access stable employment, and accumulate wealth. The perpetuation of poverty also has intergenerational effects, as children growing up in poverty are more likely to experience poverty themselves.

2. Perpetuation of Social Exclusion

The perpetuation of social exclusion is another consequence of limited opportunities for upward mobility. Social exclusion refers to the marginalization of individuals or groups from social, economic, and political opportunities. When individuals face barriers to education, job training, and career advancement, they are often excluded from social networks, community resources, and civic engagement. This perpetuates social isolation, reduces social cohesion, and erodes trust in institutions. The perpetuation of social exclusion also limits access to resources, support, and guidance, further entrenching cycles of poverty and limiting social mobility.

Widening of the achievement gap

1. Widening of the Achievement Gap

The widening of the achievement gap is a significant consequence of limited opportunities for upward mobility. When individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds face barriers to quality education, job training, and career advancement, they are unable to compete with their peers from more affluent backgrounds. This results in a widening of the achievement gap, as students from disadvantaged backgrounds fall further behind their peers in academic achievement, graduation rates, and career prospects.

2. Consequences of Widening Achievement Gap

The consequences of a widening achievement gap are far-reaching and devastating. Students who fall behind their peers are more likely to experience poverty, unemployment, and social isolation. A widening achievement gap also perpetuates cycles of poverty, as individuals are unable to break free from low-wage jobs and limited career prospects. Furthermore, a widening achievement gap erodes social mobility, reduces economic growth, and undermines social cohesion. Addressing the widening achievement gap is crucial to promoting greater social mobility and creating a more equitable society.

V. Critical Analysis of Inequality's Impact

The persistence of inequality has far-reaching consequences that extend beyond individual circumstances, perpetuating systemic injustices and undermining social cohesion. A critical analysis of inequality's impact reveals the complex web of factors that perpetuate disadvantage, limiting opportunities for marginalized groups and reinforcing existing power structures. By examining the intersections of inequality, we can better understand the ways in which systemic barriers constrain social mobility and entrench cycles of poverty.

Inequality's insidious effects permeate every aspect of society, from education and employment to healthcare and housing. A critical analysis of inequality's impact exposes the ways in which unequal access to resources, opportunities, and social networks perpetuates disadvantage, limiting the potential of individuals and communities. By scrutinizing the consequences of inequality, we can identify key areas for intervention and develop strategies to promote greater social mobility, address systemic injustices, and create a more equitable society.

Intersectionality: examining multiple forms of inequality

Intersectionality is a critical framework for understanding the complex and interconnected nature of inequality. It recognizes that individuals and groups experience multiple forms of inequality simultaneously, including racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, and classism, among others. By examining the intersections of these forms of inequality, we can gain a deeper understanding of how they compound and exacerbate one another, leading to unique experiences of discrimination and marginalization.

The intersectional approach highlights the importance of considering the multiple identities and experiences of individuals and groups, rather than focusing on a single aspect of their identity. For example, a woman of colour may experience both sexism and racism, which intersect to create a unique experience of discrimination that is distinct from that of a white woman or a man of colour. By acknowledging and addressing these intersections, we can develop more effective strategies for promoting social justice and addressing the complex needs of diverse populations.

Power Dynamics: Who Benefits from the Current System?

The current system of inequality is maintained by power dynamics that benefit certain groups at the expense of others. Those who hold power and privilege are often unaware of the advantages they receive, while those who are marginalized and oppressed are acutely aware of the disadvantages they face. Understanding who benefits from the current system is crucial to addressing inequality and promoting social justice.

1. Privilege and Oppression

Privilege refers to the unearned advantages and benefits that certain groups receive based on their social identity. Oppression, on the other hand, refers to the systemic disadvantages and barriers that marginalized groups face. Privilege and oppression are two sides of the same coin, and they perpetuate inequality by maintaining the status quo. Recognizing and addressing privilege and oppression is essential to creating a more equitable society.

2. Systemic Advantages and Disadvantages

Systemic advantages and disadvantages are built into the fabric of our society, perpetuating inequality and limiting opportunities for marginalized groups. Systemic advantages provide benefits and opportunities to those who are already privileged, while systemic disadvantages create barriers and obstacles for those who are marginalized. Understanding these systemic advantages and disadvantages is crucial to addressing inequality and promoting social justice.

3. Perpetuation of Inequality

The current system of inequality perpetuates itself through power dynamics, privilege, and systemic advantages and disadvantages. Those who benefit from the current system often work to maintain it, either consciously or unconsciously, while those who are marginalized and oppressed are often excluded from decision-making processes and denied opportunities for advancement. Addressing inequality requires a fundamental transformation of the current system and the power dynamics that maintain it.

Policy and Practice Implications

The analysis of inequality has significant policy and practice implications. Addressing systemic inequalities requires a comprehensive approach that involves policy changes, practice innovations, and community engagement. Policymakers, practitioners, and community leaders must work together to develop and implement solutions that promote equity and inclusion.

1. Addressing Systemic Inequalities

Addressing systemic inequalities requires a structural approach that targets the root causes of inequality. This involves analysing and addressing power dynamics, privilege, and systemic advantages and disadvantages. Policies and practices must be designed to promote equity and inclusion, rather than perpetuating existing inequalities.

2. Promoting Equity and Inclusion

Promoting equity and inclusion involves creating opportunities and resources for marginalized communities. This requires empowering communities to take ownership of solutions, providing access to education and employment opportunities, and addressing systemic barriers to healthcare and social services.

3. Empowering Marginalized Communities

Empowering marginalized communities involves amplifying their voices and promoting their leadership. This requires creating spaces for community engagement, supporting community-led initiatives, and addressing the systemic barriers that prevent marginalized communities from accessing resources and opportunities.

4. Implementing Evidence-Based Solutions

Implementing evidence-based solutions involves using data and research to inform policy and practice. This requires evaluating the effectiveness of solutions, identifying best practices, and scaling up successful initiatives. Evidence-based solutions must be tailored to address the specific needs of marginalized communities and promote equity and inclusion.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the critical analysis of inequality reveals a complex web of power dynamics, systemic inequalities, and structural barriers that perpetuate disadvantage and limit opportunities for marginalized groups. Addressing inequality requires a comprehensive approach that involves policy changes, practice innovations, and community engagement. By understanding the intersections of inequality and the ways in which they compound and exacerbate one another, we can develop effective strategies to promote equity and inclusion.

Ultimately, creating a more equitable society requires a fundamental transformation of the current system and the power dynamics that maintain it. This involves empowering marginalized communities, addressing systemic inequalities, and promoting evidence-based solutions. By working together to address inequality, we can create a society that values diversity, promotes inclusion, and provides opportunities for all individuals to thrive. The time for action is now, and together, we can build a more just and equitable world for future generations.

Recommendations for addressing educational inequality and promoting social mobility

1. Increase funding for public schools: Provide adequate resources and funding for public schools, particularly in disadvantaged areas. This includes investing in modern infrastructure, technology, and resources. Ensure equitable distribution of funds to address disparities.
2. Implement inclusive curricula: Develop curricula that reflect diverse perspectives and experiences. Incorporate diverse texts, histories, and voices to promote understanding and empathy. Regularly review and update curricula to address omissions and biases.
3. Provide access to quality early childhood education: Ensure universal access to quality early childhood education. Expand programs like Head Start and Pre-K to reach more children. Provide resources and support for early childhood educators.
4. Support teacher diversity and training: Recruit and train teachers from diverse backgrounds. Offer professional development opportunities to enhance cultural competence and equity-focused teaching practices. Encourage teacher mentorship programs.
5. Promote equity in higher education: Implement policies to increase access and affordability for underrepresented groups. Offer targeted scholarships, financial aid, and support services. Foster inclusive campus environments.
6. Foster community engagement: Encourage partnerships between schools, communities, and local organizations. Develop community-based programs and initiatives. Engage parents and community members in decision-making processes.
7. Address systemic barriers: Identify and address systemic barriers, such as bias and discrimination. Implement restorative justice practices and anti-bias training. Foster safe and inclusive learning environments.
8. Monitor progress: Regularly assess and address educational disparities. Track data on student outcomes, graduation rates, and college readiness. Use data to inform policy and practice changes.

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Citation: Chatterjee. Dr. S. & Swain. Prof. (Dr.) B. C., (2024) “Education and Social Mobility: A Critical Analysis of Inequality’s Impact”, *Bharati International Journal of Multidisciplinary Research & Development (BIJMRD)*, Vol-2, Issue-8, September-2024.