

SCHOOLEDUCATION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

The years people spend in school do change the way they feel but hardly make them feel happier

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SUMMARY

This article deals with the belief that a high school education results in a happier and fuller life. This idea is commonly expressed by the educationalists and gains support in several empirical studies though not in all. A secondary analysis of a survey study among 1.534 people aged 16 - 60 in the Netherlands reveals a small but significant relationship between the level of education and several indicators of psychological well being. Yet when controlled for age, sex, SES and social mobility this relationship appears to hold only for middle aged males and for people who experienced downward social mobility. Rather than making people feel happier, increased schooling seems to make people derive their satisfactions from other aspects of life. The higher the level of education, the lower is the association between avowed happiness and reported satisfaction with daily pursuits, satisfaction with the level of living, satisfaction with health and several other domain satisfactions.

1 INTRODUCTION

The continuing expansion of the school

The last century witnessed a rapid growth of the educational sector in all modern societies. Most countries now have compulsory education and all over the world the average period of education is being extended. The school entrance age is becoming lower. In most developed countries more and more children go to Kindergarten, and for three year olds play schools have become fashionable. The number of years spent in the schoolbenches increases: studying till the age of 25 is becoming less and less exceptional. Having left school one is again confronted with special educational programmes. The concept of the "education permanente", the open school, is gaining ground and bringing older people back into an educational setting. The educational activities of business enterprises and government organisations are becoming increasingly remote from the workshop and increasingly embedded in the larger educational system. To withdraw from school becomes more difficult; school age tends to be raised and many countries are developing 'compensation programmes' for people who are not schoolminded. In short: a large number of people are spending a larger part of their life in school. Comparing to other social institutions this growth in the schoolsystem is remarkable. Few institutions influence so many people at such a receptive period of their lives. Even the Church in its heyday in mediaeval Europe probably had less control over peoples minds than the school has today.

Need for an evaluation

How should we evaluate this trend? Is it a beneficial development which deserves to be stimulated or should we take the advice of Illich (1970) and "de school" society?

Our answer should depend upon our knowledge of the effects of extending the educational sector: effects for the society as a whole as well as for the individual citizen. Does education bring greater

economic prosperity? Do our educational efforts result in a wiser administration, in greater justice and more equality? Is the educational system a source of new ideas, new meanings and inventions?

And on the individual level: does the extended stay in educational institutions result in more stable persons who will make wiser decisions in life? Will they be happier and healthier? Will the school help them to realise their personal goals in life? Do the years spent in school constitute a happy period? Does the school offer more satisfaction than work or other activities?

Lack of data

Current knowledge about such effects of education is limited. There is a wealth of speculation and belief, but a lack of factual information. Efforts to supply such information by empirical research have not yet been very successful. The investigators encountered serious methodological problems and reached results which were often contradictory.

Idenburg (1971) stated in his valedictory lecture that he had never been able to substantiate his belief in the positive social effects of education. It had turned out to be very difficult to demonstrate the independent effect of the educational system on social equality, science, technique, morals, law, etc. Even the claim that schooling raises economic growth could not be supported with convincing facts. On the individual level the long term effects of more education are no clearer. Empirical studies are plentiful but their results contradictory.

Goal of this paper

The present article studies the effects which schooleducation has on personal psychological well-being in adult life. It is meant to present some relevant data, to refute some naive ideas and to indicate problems. It does not aim at a comprehensive explanation of the empirical findings reported.

2 COMMON SENSE ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE POSITIVE EFFECTS OF SCHOOLING

Teachers and parents often express the belief that the future well-being of their children largely depends on their success at school. For the sake of their own happiness children are encouraged to forego present enjoyment for the benefits of future educational success. Sometimes they are severely punished for poor results at school and are often overloaded with homework.

The beneficial effect of school attendance upon children is a long held belief. For Rousseau education was a sure way to personal happiness and those who worked for the introduction of compulsory education also used this kind of argument. Today pedagogues are more careful: they avoid the word "happiness" and describe the goals of education in terms of "balanced growth", "inner stability", "social competence" etc. Nevertheless, in current political debates about the schoolleaving age and compulsory education we often see schooling being equated with happiness.

Assumptions

This belief seems to be based on two assumptions, the first of which holds that education is satisfying in itself and the second that school-success opens the way to a privileged social position.

The first assumption stresses the satisfaction of learning and understanding. Philosophers from every age have talked of the satisfaction of intellectual comprehension and part of the liberal heritage of the Enlightenment is the strong belief in the benefits of education for broadening satisfaction and making for a fuller and happier life. Today this assumption is strengthened by the conviction that the activation of all human potentials is satisfying and healthy, and that schooleducation provides not only intellectual stimulation but furthers the development of other faculties as well

The second assumption asserts that education opens the door to upward social mobility and as such gives rise to a greater sense of well-being. This idea is more recent and is typical of the achievement orientation of the western middle-class culture.

Predictions

These assumptions are open to empirical falsification. Both predict a positive relationship between educational success and indicators of psychological well-being.

The first assumption predicts a direct and universal relationship. Universal because the assumption holds that the relationship results from intellectual stimulation as such rather than from the social benefits associated with a good social position in Western society.

The second assumption predicts a two step relationship: education is linked to social mobility and social mobility is linked to psychological well-being. This assumption is limited to cultures where status allocation is regulated by the educational system.

On the following pages we will assess the tenability of these assumptions. We will consider them in the light of results of previous research and test them in a secondary analysis of a recent national health survey among 1500 inhabitants aged 18 - 65 in the Netherlands (Aakster 1972).

3 TESTING THE ASSUMPTIONS

3.1 Level of education and well-being

The first assumption predicts a positive and universal relationship between the level of schooling and the average sense of individual well-being.

The investigations summarised in [Table 1](#) supply only partial support for this assumption. Most studies show significant positive relationships but certainly not all. The relationship between education and well-being varies with time, country and group membership. The variation with time is strikingly demonstrated in the Netherlands. In 1953 Buchanan & Cantril (1953) demonstrated a positive relationship in this country, but this result was not reproduced in the later studies of Garoudek (1963), Moser-Peeters (1969) and Elsevier (1970). We have witnessed a similar development in the U.S.A. - that of school education losing its "happiness bonus" during the past few years.

In comparing nations we see striking differences, but to find a clear pattern in these differences is difficult. A slight tendency for a stronger happiness-effect of education can be observed in the underdeveloped countries in the Cantril (1965) study. The present data do not permit an interpretation of these international differences. To provide a meaningful explanation we need more information and a general theory of happiness.

Finally, [Table 1](#) demonstrates how the effects of schooling vary with group membership. These variations appear clearer in our own data, presented in [Table 2](#). Here we see a small but significant relationship with several indicators of well-being. However, when elaborated for age, sex, SES and social mobility some of these relationships disappear. The remaining relationships hold only for specific subgroups in the population, mainly for males in their middle years and for people who experienced downward social mobility. So the relationship is certainly not universal.

These results do not refute the idea that the activation and development of human potentials is healthy and satisfying. Neither do they deny the satisfaction of intellectual development. But they do raise serious doubt as to the possibilities of realising such goals in the present school system.

3.2 Education, social mobility and well-being

When testing the second assumption one must first of all assess the tenability of the prediction that education gives rise to upward social mobility. A cursory view of the literature reveals that this prediction does not meet confirmation in all situations. The elaborate study of Jencks et al (1972) reveals that in the U.S.A. success at school and a good education are not associated with later intergenerational mobility nor with economic success. The authors conclude that the expansion of the educational system did not result in a more equal society nor did it result in more equality of opportunity in unequal societies. In the Netherlands, however, the predicted relationship is confirmed. Dutchmen with a better education tend to experience more upward intergenerational mobility ($G = .24$ $p < .05$). But this does not

imply that their well-being increases. As can be seen in [Table 3](#), social mobility is not related to psychological well-being in the Netherlands.

So at the moment this second assumption enjoys no empirical support either in the U.S.A. or in the Netherlands. These results do not exclude the possibility that the assumption will sometimes prove true in an other place, but they do correct a belief which is too often taken for granted. These data refer to general psychological well-being only. They do not imply that schooling does not result in greater job satisfaction, more social freedom, better social integration or other benefits claimed by the educationalists.

3.3 Schooleducation and the sources of personal well-being

The correlations mentioned above give but a limited insight into the relationship between education and well-being. A richer picture emerges when we consider the spheres of life from which people with different levels of education derive their satisfactions and the relative importance of these spheres for general well-being.

For this purpose we computed the association between happiness and several domain satisfactions for all-educational levels separately. The results are presented in [Table 4](#). They show clearly that, in the higher educational levels, happiness tends to vary less with the satisfactions commonly thought to be most important in life :

It is not easy to account for this phenomenon. Ruling out the possibility that these results stem from factors associated with school success - intelligence and achievement motivation for example - at least three explanations are open to us. First it could be that education makes people less sensitive for these common satisfactions: for example by stressing higher values or by an unintended understimulation of the affective and social development. A second possibility is that intellectual development makes people less dependent on their environment, makes them function more in their own minds rendering their happiness a more intra-psychological matter. A third possibility is that education makes people more sensitive to other satisfactions and makes them less dependent on the gratifications covered by this study. This latter explanation is in line with Gurin et al. (1960) who concluded that education produces an emotional life which is more differentiated. They found that their highly educated subjects tended to experience more satisfactions but also more dissatisfactions in the same spheres of life. They were happier but at the same time exhibited more neurotic complaints and psychotic symptoms. Our data do not permit definitive conclusions. This phenomenon needs further research; first of all a retest.

4 CONCLUSION

Contrary to general belief there is no universal, direct or clear-cut relationship between the level of education and psychological well-being. The effects of education are limited and highly dependent on all kinds of intervening variables of which we have no clear understanding. This casts some doubt on claims for further expansion of the educational field when they are made in the name of the well-being of pupils.

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Table 1

Level of school-education and psychological well-being in several studies

country/year/sample	author/page	indicator of psychological well-being used:	association with level of education	elaboration
<u>Australia</u>				
1948 national sample	Buchanan 130	single direct question on life-satisfaction	* $G = + .05$ $p < .01$	
<u>England</u>				
1948 national sample	Buchanan 138	single direct question on life-satisfaction	* $G = - .08$ ns	
<u>France</u>				
1948 national sample	Buchanan 148	single direct question on life-satisfaction	* $G = + .22$ $p < .01$	
<u>Germany</u>				
1948 Brittish occupation zone	Buchanan 156	single direct question on life-satisfaction	* $G = - .02$ ns	
1949 Berlin	Buchanan 165	single direct question on life-satisfaction	* $G = - .12$ ns	
<u>Italy</u>				
1948 national sample	Buchanan 176	single direct question on life satisfaction	* $G = + .14$ $p < .01$	
<u>Mexico</u>				
1948 national sample	Buchanan 189	single direct question on life satisfaction	* $G = + .20$ $p < .01$	
<u>Puerto-Rico</u>				
1966 national sample	Matlin 19	single direct question on life-satisfaction	* $G = + .49$ $p < .01$	high income group only

Netherlands

1948	national sample	Buchanan 197	single direct question on life-satisfaction	* G = + .49 p < .01	
1963	national sample	Gadourek 384a	4 item index of domain satisfactions	r = + .01 ns	
1969	national sample	Moser-Peeters 20	single direct question on happiness	* G = + .01 ns	not affected by sex and age
1970	national sample	Elsevier	5 item happiness scale	* G = + .12 < .01	

Norway

1948	national sample	Buchanan 205	single direct question on life-satisfaction	* G = + .29 p < .01	
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USA

1931	students of education and YMCA members	Sailor 36	70 item index of happiness	* G = + .20 p < .01	
1948	national sample	Buchanan 213	single direct question on life-satisfaction	* G = + .20 p < .01	
1956	national sample	Wessman 188	single direct question on happiness	* G = + .25 p < .01	
1956	national sample	Gurin 47	single direct question on happiness	* G = + .26 p < .01	
1965	four town in Michigan differing in economic prosperity	Bradburn 9	single direct question on happiness	* G = + .27 p < .01	stronger in low income group in all ages reversed in high income 60+ aged group
1969	aged people in Boston	Fowler 733	single direct question on prevalent moods	ns	relationship disappears when controlled for income

1972	rural aged females Mississippi	Stajonovic 34	17 item index of satisfaction with daily activities	$r = + .32$ ns	lower for whites
1972	42-69 aged population Duke	Pallmore 70	single direct question on life-satisfaction	$r = + .03$	stronger in low income group ($r = + .06$)
1974	national sample	Andrews 20	single direct question on life-satisfaction	$h^2 = + .07$	
1974	adult population Toledo	Snyder 32	single direct question on happiness	$G = - .08$	
<u>world population</u>					
1965	national samples in twelve coun- tries in economic development	Cantril 259	single direct question on evaluation of present life-situation	$* G = + .35$	$p < .01$

* G values and significance computed by the present authors

Table 2"

level of education and various indicators of psychological well-being in the adult population of the Netherlands in 1970 (N = 1534)

indicators of psychological well-being	association with level of education Gamma interval		elaboration for sex, age, SES and social mobility
<u>happiness</u>			
direct question rated on 7 point rating scale	+ .12 ^s	.07	significant in age 25-30 (G = + .23), among males (G = + .13) and among persons who experienced intergenerational social mobility. The relationship is unaffected by SES
<u>contentment with life</u>			
direct question rated on 7 point rating scale	+ .13 ^s	.07	Significant only for males (G = + .15) in age 25-40 (G = + .38 to + .32), middle SES classes (G = + .32 b + .13) and among those who experienced a small amount of downward social mobility
<u>sense of usefulness</u>			
direct question rated on 7 point rating scale	+ .15 ^s	.08	significant for males (G = + .18) in ages 25-30 (G = + .45) and 45-50 (G = + .39) and for females (G = + .16) in age 55-60 (G = +.59) and among those who experienced a small amount of downward social mobility. Also significant in the lowest SES class (G = + .31)

depression

factor containing 10 items
rated on 7 point scale,
e.g., status, dissatis-
faction, affective dissatis-
faction, tobacco usage

+ .15^s .09

Significant only for males (G = + .22) in ages
25-30 (G = + .33) and 45-50 (G = + .48). The
relationship disappeared when controlled for SES
and social mobility

Sociosis

factor containing 12 items
rated on 7 point scale, e.g.,
social mobility, disinte-
grated parental family

+ .15^s .10

Significant only for males (G = + .15) in ages
25-30 (G = + .28). The relationship disappeared
when controlled for SES and social mobility

stress

general index of complaints
index of 56 items, concerning
psychosomatic complaints, rated
on 9 point scale.

.00 .16

Significant for males in ages 25-35 (G = +.32 to
+ .29) and for females in age 35-40 (G = + .26)

s = significant at the 95% level of confidence

Table 3

Psychological well-being and social mobility in the adult population of the Netherlands (N = 1534) in 1970

social mobility \ indicators of psychological well-being	Happiness		Contentment		Sense of usefulness		Depression		Sociosis		Stress	
	Gamma	int.	gamma	int.	gamma	int.	gamma	int.	gamma	int.	gamma	int.
discrepancy with fathers SES	+ 0.03	0.08	+0.02	0.06	- 0.06	+0.09	+0.06	0.10	+0.02	0.06	+0.00	0.06
upward social mobility compared to fathers SES	+ 0.03	0.11	-0.01	0.09	- 0.02	0.13	+0.05	0.15	+0.00	0.10	-0.02	0.09
downward social mobility compared to fathers SES	+ 0.03	0.09	+0.05	0.10	- 0.06	0.12	-0.02	0.13	+0.03	0.09	+0.06	0.08
discrepancy between level of school education and actual occupation status	+ 0.04	0.07	+0.09 ^s	0.07	+0.03	0.09	+0.07	0.10	+0.01	0.07	-0.01	0.06
over-achievement	+0.02	0.08	+0.10 ^s	0.08	- 0.08	0.10	+0.01	0.12	-0.01	0.08	+0.04	0.07
under-achievement	+0.07	0.16	+0.01	0.15	- 0.31	0.16	+0.16	0.21	+0.02	0.14	+0.02	0.13

s = significant of the 95% level of confidence

Variation in association between happiness and domain satisfactions at different levels of education in the adult population of the Netherlands in 1970 (N = 1534)

