

Nevena Kulic

Bruce Bradbury, Miles Corak, Jane Waldfogel and Elisabeth Washbrook, "Too Many Children Left Behind: The U.S. Achievement Gap in Comparative Perspective." New York: Russel Sage, 2015, 224 pp.

(doi: 10.2383/85817)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 3, settembre-dicembre 2016

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

Book review. Social Inequalities in the XXI Century

Bruce Bradbury, Miles Corak, Jane Waldfogel and Elisabeth Washbrook, "Too Many Children Left Behind: The U.S. Achievement Gap in Comparative Perspective." New York: Russel Sage, 2015, 224 pp.

doi: 10.2383/85817

Bradbury and his co-authors have written an extremely relevant and interesting piece with important messages. This book brings into discussion many issues that have been debated over the past twenty years but have not been brought together in one study: it tackles the role of social background in children's achievement gaps over time, from early childhood to adolescence. The conditions that a state creates to enable equal opportunities for all children is a parallel focus of this discussion, and partly answers the question of whether and to what extent institutions matter. As such, it breaks ground in comparative research on child achievement and the opportunities that children face. Furthermore, it relies on sophisticated methods that are, however, made secondary; the impressive clarity of the analyses and explanations make them seem less of a central issue. This demonstrates the authors' expertise and long-term investment in these arguments, as well as their interest in opening the topic to a wider audience of policymakers, scholars and ordinary people.

The book starts by explaining the roots of SES inequality in achievement by focusing on the preschool years. Sequentially, it develops a life course perspective as children are followed from the beginning of formal schooling (age 4/5) to the early teen years (at least age 11 or later). The volume dedicates three detailed chapters to achievement gaps at school entry, and in school years. In one of them, it also focuses on the diverging trajectories of children of different social backgrounds – be this the parental education or income. Although it is rather descriptive in its nature – asking whether there are SES differences in achievement gaps rather than modelling explanations – it also provides rich material on why the gaps exist. Different aspects of parental resources, employment and school factors are analysed for their role in achievement gaps, at each stage of the developmental process of children. The authors collect rich datasets from the U.S. (ECLS-K), Canada (NLSCY), Australia (LSAC-K) and the UK (Millennium cohort study), performing some general comparisons and going into depth in particular cases. Nevertheless, the U.S. is made the focal point of the analysis and other countries are compared to it; these are countries with an Anglo-Saxon background, which share some common institutional settings with the United States, but also display some differences. The authors fully succeed in assuring comparability whenever it is possible, from the standardization of measures through to the choice of most similar indicators for different national contexts.

The book comes to some important conclusions: the SES gradient in children's achievement exists in all the studied countries, and is growing over time. Taken together, this raises awareness that early years matter but much also happens further on in the life-course, with implications for policies. The authors also argue that some children are simply more often left behind in all contexts; they illustrate how low achieving high SES students in primary school are on average more likely to make up for low scores further

on in their school career whereas this is rarely the case of low achieving students from low SES families. Finally, on a comparative note, the highest SES ingredient in achievement is in the United States and it is relatively consistent over time. This shows that differences between countries should be explored in an effort to eliminate the inequality of opportunity that derives from institutional engagement.

The book has many fine qualities: just to mention some, I will focus on three points that I take with me after reading the book. Bradbury and colleagues study inequalities in more detail than the existing literature on early SES gaps typically does, and acknowledge the differences between low, middle and high SES children. They underline that the SES achievement gaps exist at two different levels, low versus medium gap and high versus medium gap. In other words, it is misleading to believe that middle class children have it all: there are subtle and less subtle differences in opportunities and achievement between middle SES and high SES children, which need full attention, especially in some contexts. This is an important message, as we need to understand that grouping families together should be done with caution, and may differ in societies of different levels of inequality. Second, inequality is seen as a process: it starts early and it develops continually. The authors show that policies are important at each and every stage of this process, for better or worse. Finally, the book illustrates important differences across countries that result from different policies. Institutions matter; there are countries that perform better in the creation of equal environments. The authors thus invite us to focus on what *can* be done, rather than staying in the loop of providing no solutions.

Still, the book also leaves us with some open questions and unexplored areas of research that could be extended subsequently. The first issue is related to the lack of data availability. The book compares the U.S. and Canada in the 1990s with Australia and the UK in the 2000s. Although the data are substantially similar, they are distant from each other by almost a decade. This might be problematic for at least two reasons: there have been many changes in childcare policies and an investment in the schooling of children below school age, and particularly below the age of three, in both the U.S. and Canada so the preschool market may have also rapidly changed. Second, this could have had consequences for social inequality in achievement as well as inequality of opportunity for children, with inequalities either growing or shrinking. On a similar note, the authors open the field for the role of preschool in early achievement gaps yet rather underestimate the role of preschool as a phase of schooling process. If 60-70 percent of the SES gap in achievement at age 14 is due to early factors – before primary school, as reported by Bradbury and colleagues [p. 112] – perhaps more attention could be expected to be given to the diversity of the preschool systems and childcare below and above the age of three, to the definitions of kindergartens in different systems, and even to the diversity of options if there is a universal preschool offered. Children meet the educational system much earlier than in formal school and the differences in the early years can be even more attributed to it, particularly in the recent years of development in early childhood education. The literature shows that childcare options vary in quality, programs, intensity and form, so that preschools can reproduce inequalities to an important degree. A more critical analysis of the preschool markets, which can be very different across countries, is also missing from the last chapter of the book, which focuses on policies. For instance, only the existence of universal coverage is men-

tioned as a solution for substantial gaps, rather than the need for monitoring and creating quality of service. This definitely needs a stronger case in policy recommendations. The concrete suggestions are thus shifted from proposing pre-school policies affecting gaps in early childhood to policies exerting their influence in later childhood and adolescence, which are important, yet, as we have seen, explain less of the overall achievement gap.

To conclude, what we have learned from this project is that SES achievement gaps are formed early, that there are intergenerational consequences of childhood gaps, and that this calls for a complex set of policies. Different country institutions provide different opportunities for children. Although the “problem of the family” [p. 134], as the authors call it, will likely continue to exist, the social stratification of family choices will be softer if policies are better formulated to protect children. The authors provide a strong analysis that conveys powerful messages while making social science closer to ordinary people. Each sub-topic of this book can be further expanded as a future avenue for research on the achievement gaps between children of different families. We certainly do need more books that raise awareness and propose solutions like this one. Thus, I hope that this is only the beginning of a long book series on how we can work together to reduce early inequalities.

Nevena Kulic

European University Institute (EUI)