

Schools, Policy and Social Change

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Education policy does not operate in a vacuum. It interacts with the legacies of schools to modify students' experience and, indeed, the intentions of policy makers. It has seldom been possible to investigate the role of schools in mediating policy and social change. An internationally unique series of surveys in Scotland, however, allows these complex processes to be traced through the whole of the second half of the twentieth century. Institutional traditions can sometimes constrain change, but they can also help to bring it about.

- Education policy in Scotland aimed throughout the twentieth century to widen opportunity in secondary school.
- Secondary education for all was established between the early twentieth century and the mid-1930s, creating a selective system with differences in curriculum and status across the different school sectors.
- The ending of selection and the creation of comprehensive schools - which happened between the mid-1960s and the late-1970s - played an important role in processes of equalisation.
- Opportunity did expand for students: participation and attainment rose steadily.
- Sex inequality vanished, or was reversed, with female students coming to have higher attainment than male students.
- Socio-economic inequality narrowed with respect to attainment, but widened with respect to breadth of curriculum, even though in all social groups a higher proportion than hitherto followed a broad curriculum.
- Deliberate education policy does not operate in a vacuum: the earlier policy and reforms in the first three decades of the twentieth century interacted with the 1960s policy to shape the ways in which schools with different legacies reacted to the creation of a comprehensive system of schooling.
- Policy proceeds incrementally. The institutional effects of the 1960s and 1970s could be understood only by paying attention also to the legacies of older reforms.
- Policies which work with the grain of a school's ethos are more likely to succeed in that school than policies which seek to transform it.
- It can take a very long time for policy to have its intended effect, and in the short term it might even seem to have failed; short term evaluations can only offer a limited assessment of policy.
- The unique series of surveys that enabled this investigation came to an end in 2004, meaning that subsequent reforms cannot be evaluated with the same historical perspective.

Introduction

In debates and analyses of socio-economic inequality in educational attainment, attention has largely focused on policy at the level of the state and / or on social change happening across whole societies. It has seldom been possible to investigate the role of schools in mediating policy and social change. Yet this is a core question for educational policy because it provides a test of the extent to which educational change is brought about by policy change, or, alternatively, as an indirect consequence of social change. Few previous studies of inequality have investigated the effects of specific types of institutions, across an entire education system, or over a long period of time. Yet schools can modify policy through their histories, rituals and myths. On the one hand, institutional effects - such as school traditions, practices, teacher careers, buildings, student pathways and orientations - may make it difficult to effect any profound change but, on the other, they can also help bring about change.

This *Briefing* reports on an analysis of a unique series of surveys of students in Scotland that provides the opportunity to investigate these complex interactions. These surveys - covering a range from people who left school in the early 1950s to those who left at the end of the century - mean it is possible to investigate long-term trends in inequalities in secondary school progression and attainment but also, critically, to examine the role of policy and school institutional history.

Policy change in Scotland

Key reforms in the twentieth century are summarised in Figure 1. Some kind of secondary education for all was established between the early twentieth century and the mid-1930s, the first period in Figure 1, leading to a selective system of schools (more detail below).

Figure 1: Scottish policy on secondary schooling in the twentieth century: main reforms	
1900-30s:	Secondary education for all
1965-70s:	Comprehensive education
1986-90s:	Common curriculum and assessment

The best-known reform was the ending of selection between different kinds of school in the public sector, the second period in this Figure. Comprehensive secondary schooling was introduced from 1965, and achieved universal coverage in the public-sector schools by the beginning of the 1980s. Thereafter the only selective schools were independent of public management and charged fees (containing about 5% of students).

After the minimum leaving age was raised from 15 to 16 in 1973, there also had to be a revision to the curriculum of the middle years of secondary school. The resulting reforms led to properly planned courses for almost the full range of ability in the 1980s, the third period in Figure 1. That reform then subsequently enabled a new curriculum framework to be put in place in the 1990s, making more or less compulsory the core subjects at mid-secondary level.

School histories and legacies

The selective system of schools that preceded the comprehensive system had been established in several waves, creating five recognisable subsets of schools. These are shown in Figure 2 along with their relative sizes in the late-1940s.

Figure 2: Secondary education for all: school sectors (entrants in 1947)	
Sector	Share of students (%)
Pre-twentieth-century secondaries	12
Secondaries founded 1900-24	22
Secondaries founded after 1924	11
Academic junior secondary	15
Junior secondary	40

At the top of the Figure are schools which were founded before the twentieth century, of which there were about 50. The main policy change that would culminate in the selective secondary system was in the first decade of the twentieth century. The core element of the change was that central government encouraged and funded the creation of nearly 200 new secondary schools to serve districts populated mainly by the lower middle class and the skilled working class. That expansion came to an end in 1924 when about two thirds of these new schools were recognised as full secondaries: these are the second group in Figure 2. Some new secondaries continued to be built (the third group), giving three distinct sub-

sets of what were called senior secondaries, the highest-status parts of the selective system which comprehensive schooling eventually replaced.

The lower-status parts of the selective system were called junior secondaries, of which there were two kinds. The larger group consisted of essentially primary schools with a short secondary department added on top, the last group in Figure 2. These were the lowest-status of all the schools in the selective system. But some of the junior secondaries developed from the one-third of pre-1924 new schools which were not recognised as full secondaries in 1924. Because they retained something of the academic ethos of their origins, many of them insisted on teaching academic courses to some students, despite official discouragement.

The legacies from reform in the first half of the century potentially interacted with the later reforms of the 1960s, because schools of different origins ended selection at different dates. For example, whereas 99% of the non-academic junior secondaries had become (or merged with) full comprehensives by the mid-1970s, 17% of the oldest schools did not reform until the early 1980s. On the other hand, only 58% of the former non-academic junior secondaries had become comprehensive by the early 1970s, in contrast to 77% of the third group in Figure 2, the schools that were founded between the late-1920s and the 1950s.

So the question is: how, if at all, did these institutional histories interact with policy change and social change in the second half of the twentieth century?

Methods

The series of surveys used here is summarised in Figure 3, along with the organisations which ran them. It covers people who were aged 16 in 1952, and then mostly every two years from the mid-1970s to the end of the century. For Figures 4, 5 and 6, we also have a time point in 1962, using the Scottish sub-sample of the UK-wide National Study of Health and Development, a cohort study of people born in 1946. The total sample size in all these surveys combined is about 100,000 students, in about 420 schools. This series is unique internationally in its combination of length of coverage and breadth of topics.

Figure 3: Surveys of school students, 1952-2002

Survey	Date at which sample members left school
Scottish Mental Survey (cohort) (Scottish Centre for Research in Education)	1951-4
Scottish School Leavers' Surveys (Centre for Educational Sociology)	Mostly biennial, 1976-82
Scottish Young People's Surveys (cohorts) (Centre for Educational Sociology)	Biennial, 1984-90
Survey of Young People in Scotland (cohorts) (ScotCen)	Biennial, 1996-2002

We consider two outcomes of schooling: examinations taken in the middle and final years of school; and the rate of staying on beyond age 16. The final-years examination was known as the Higher Grade throughout. The main mid-secondary examinations were the Lower Grade (1950s), Ordinary Grade (1960s-1980s), and Standard Grade (late-1980s to after the end of the century).

The graphs summarise attainment in terms of sex, socio-economic status (SES), and sector of schooling. SES is a combination of the education level of both parents and the occupational class of the father; these can be grouped into three categories:

high SES: families where at least one parent completed full secondary schooling, and where the father was in a professional occupation;

medium SES: families where at least one parent had reached mid-secondary education (but not beyond), and where the father was in a skilled job;

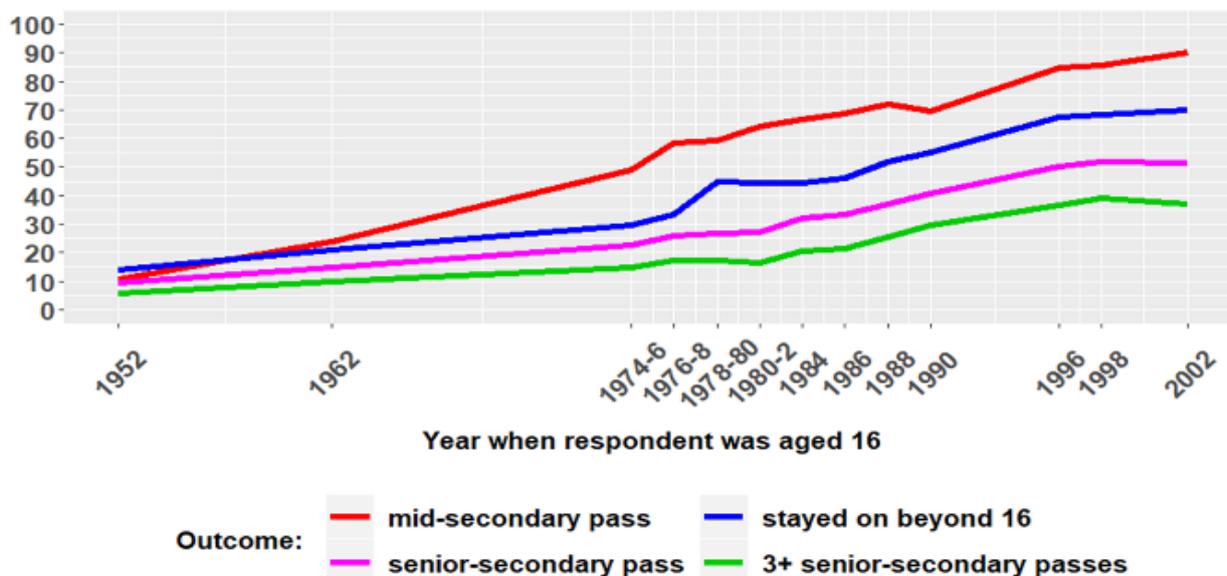
low SES: families where both parents left school at the earliest opportunity, and where the father was in an unskilled job.

All the results reported are statistically significant at the 5% level: i.e., unlikely to be due to chance. Full technical details are in the main reference at the end.

Expansion of access to school examinations

Figure 4 illustrates sheer expansion. The red line shows the growth of certification at mid-secondary level: the proportion passing at least one subject there was around 10% in 1952, one quarter in 1962, over one half in the mid-1970s, three quarters by the late 1980s, and 90% at the end of the century.

Figure 4: Percentage attaining various levels, 1952-2002



There is a similar trajectory for other school outcomes. The blue line is voluntarily staying on beyond age 16, the pink line is passes in the Higher Grade, and the green line is three or more passes at Higher, which, for most of the period, was informally the threshold for entry directly to university after leaving school.

Socio-economic inequality of attainment gradually reduced after the 1970s. Figure 5 shows passing at mid-secondary level, by socio-economic status and

sex. All the lines rise, and the hierarchy remained quite stable, but the gap reduced, more for females than for males towards the end. There was a similar trajectory for staying on, which then fed into a rise in successful attainment in the school stages after staying on: Figure 6 shows that socio-economic differences remained wider than on the mid-secondary criterion, but they did narrow, especially for female students. Indeed, the female trajectory overtook the male trajectory at each level of SES.

Figure 5: percentage attaining mid-secondary pass, by sex and socio-economic status, 1952-1998

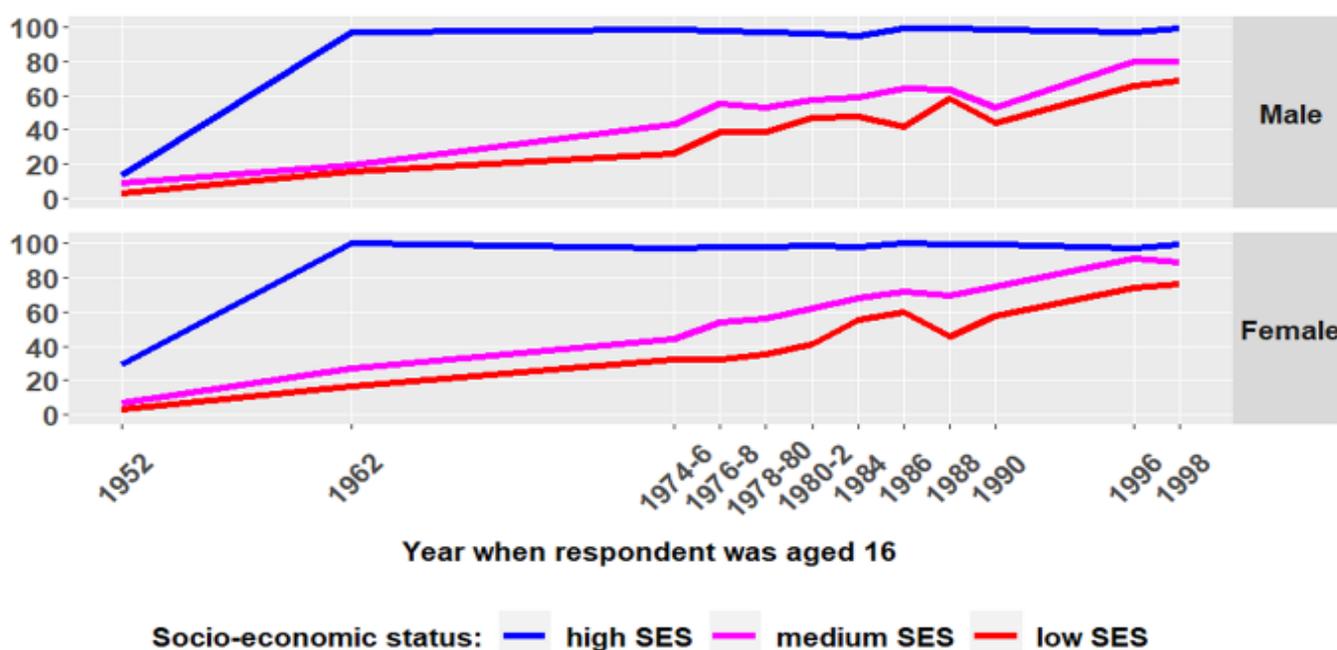
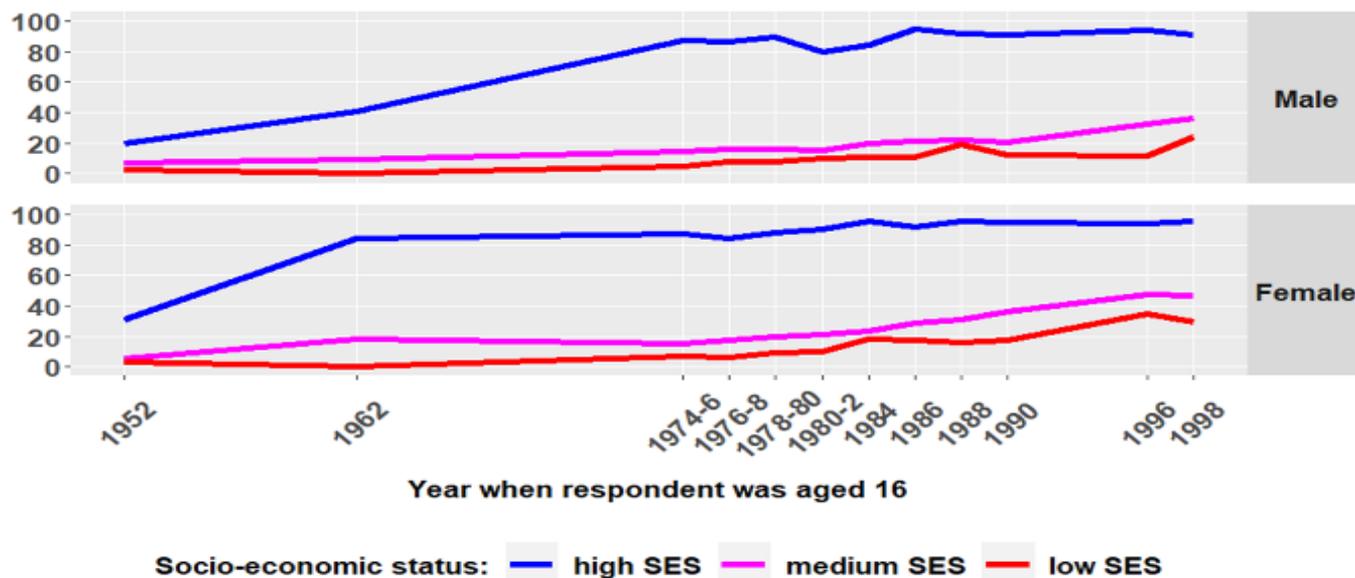


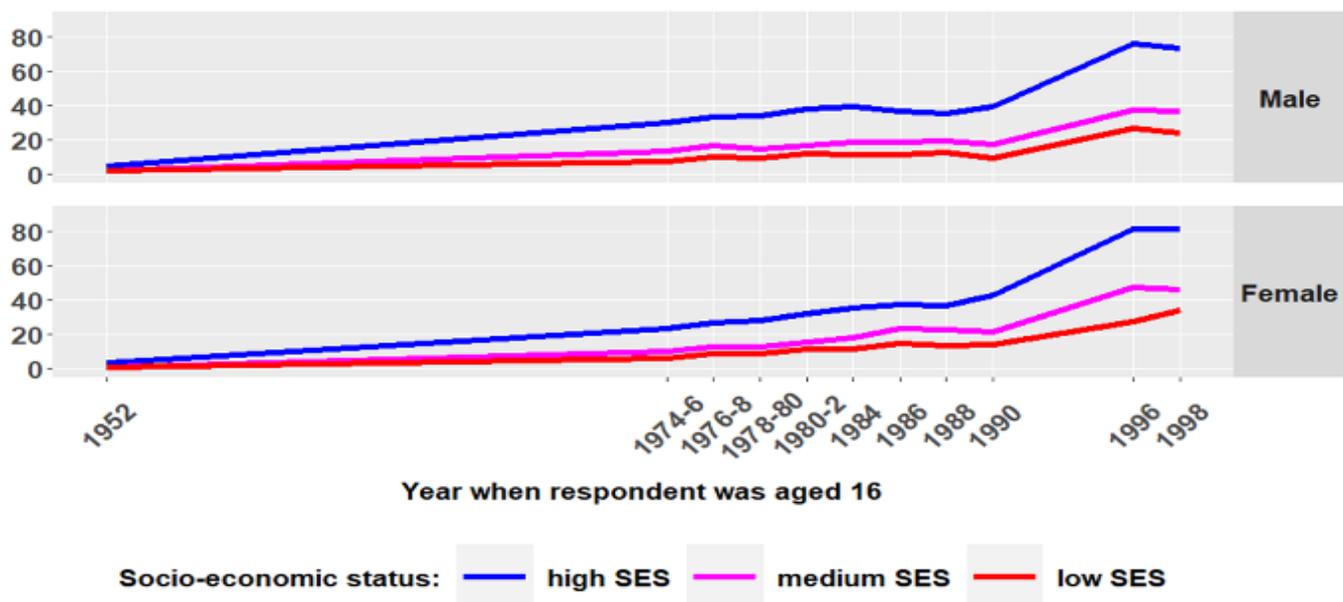
Figure 6: percentage attaining senior -secondary pass, by sex and socio-economic status, 1952-1998



There was also a broadening of the curriculum at mid-secondary level. Breadth is defined to be at least one pass in English, mathematics, a natural science,

and a social subject, a language or an aesthetic subject. Figure 7 shows that there was a rise in all groups, but also widening inequality.

Figure 7: percentage attaining breadth at mid-secondary level, by sex and socio-economic status, 1952-1998

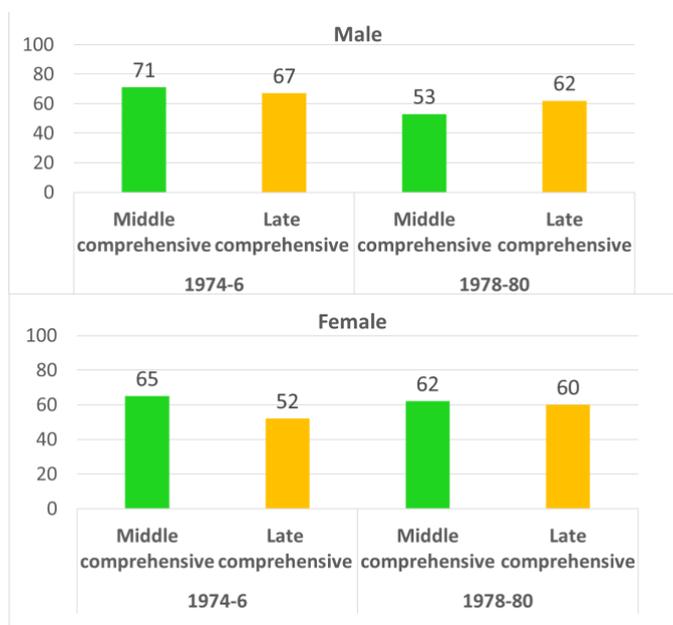


The end of selection and its impact on attainment

Here we look only at public-sector schools, omitting the independent schools that never stopped selecting. Figure 8 (next page) shows the attainment gap between high-SES and low-SES students in schools that had two types of trajectory during the

main reforming period of the 1970s. The green bars correspond to schools which became comprehensive in the mid-1970s: thus the leavers in 1976 here experienced these schools when they were selective, whereas the leavers in 1980 experienced them when they were comprehensive. The orange bars are schools which were selective at both dates.

Figure 8: SES percentage-point attainment gap at mid-secondary level, by sex and middle and late comprehensives, 1974-6 and 1978-80



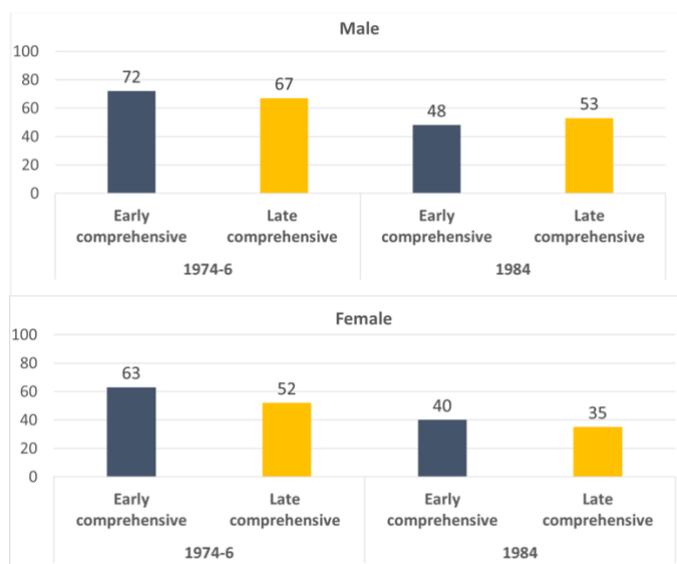
'Middle comprehensives': selective in 1974-6 and comprehensive in 1978-80. 'Late comprehensives': selective at both dates.

For males, although there was also a reduction of inequality in the late comprehensives, it was less than the reduction for the middle comprehensives. For females, there was a reduction of inequality for the middle comprehensives, but an increase for the late comprehensives.

We reach a similar conclusion if we then look at what happened to the late comprehensives when these schools, in turn, became comprehensive in time for people aged 16 in 1984. Figure 9 compares these schools (still in orange) with the group of early reformers that were comprehensive throughout this period, which are in dark blue. Over the whole period, the late comprehensives do show a fall of inequality. So becoming comprehensive after 1980 compensated for any stagnation or increase of inequality before that (as in Figure 8). But the early comprehensives show a greater fall of inequality than the late comprehensives, which is consistent with what might be called a maturing effect of the earlier comprehensives.

So the rate of an institution's adopting a reform can make a difference. But that analysis is not enough, because there is also a legacy from older reforms earlier in the twentieth century.

Figure 9: SES percentage-point attainment gap at mid-secondary level, by sex and early and late comprehensives, 1974-6 and 1984



'Early comprehensives': comprehensive in both dates.

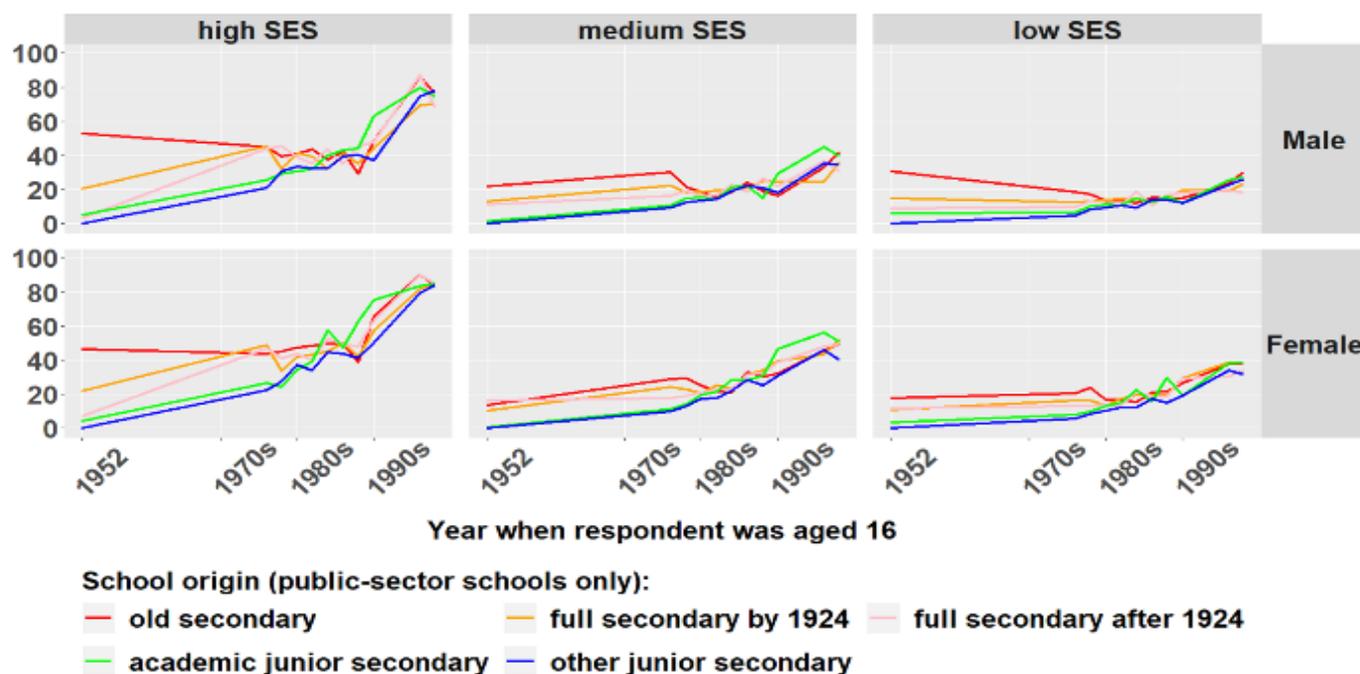
'Late comprehensives': selective in 1974-6, comprehensive in 1984.

The effect of school origin

The legacy of the pre-1930 expansion of secondary schooling was still evident as late as the 1970s in their social composition. The oldest schools had higher proportions of high-SES pupils than the schools founded in the first few decades of the century, which in turn had higher proportions of these pupils than the schools which were junior secondaries before the 1960s. By the end of the century all these social distinctions in the public-sector schools had gone, but the independent schools continued to have much larger proportions of high-SES pupils than the public-sector schools.

The historically defined sectors also had legacies in attainment. Figure 10 shows the proportion attaining at least one Higher from 1952 to the end of the century, still confined to public-sector schools. The lines for the different schools were still somewhat separate even in the late-1970s. Especially at medium-SES and low-SES, there was a hierarchy of attainment: the oldest secondaries (red here) were mostly ahead of the newer schools created by the 1920s (orange and pink), even when these were full senior secondaries in 1952 and even after most of these schools were comprehensive in 1980. The two junior-secondary sectors were, of course, far behind in 1952, and took a while to catch up during the move to comprehensive schooling, but there was full convergence by the end of the century.

Figure 10: percentage attaining senior-secondary pass, by sex, socio-economic status and school origin, 1952-1998



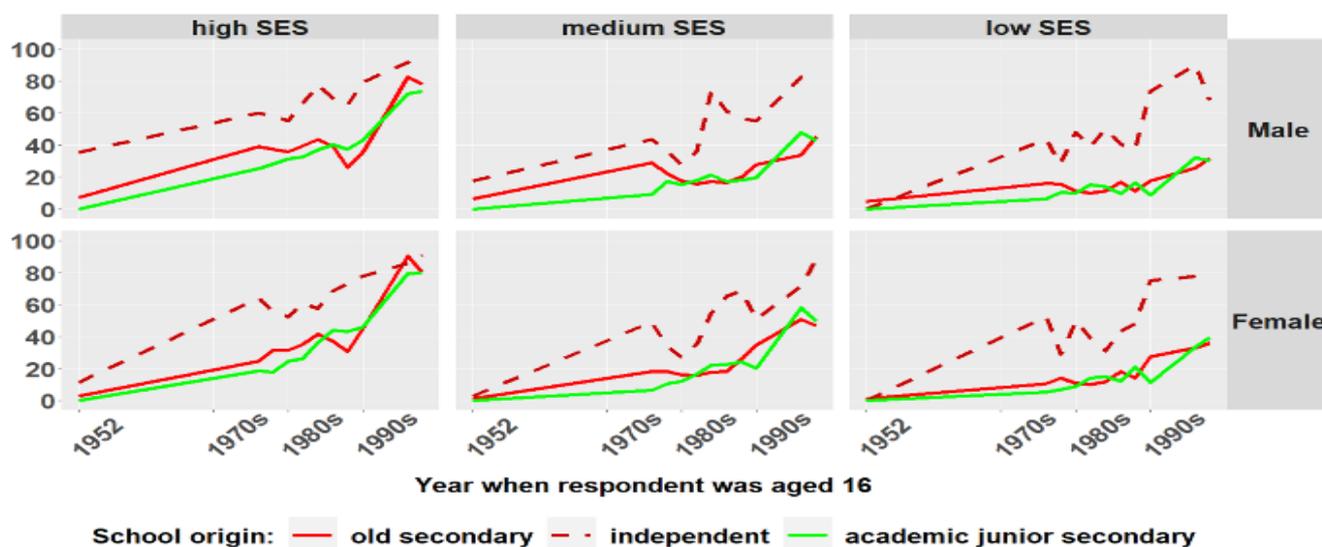
This is evidence of policy having an effect. If it had not been for the early-twentieth-century reforms, the orange and pink groups on this graph would not exist. If it had not been for the comprehensive reforms, the green and blue groups would not have caught up.

The comprehensive reforms also interacted with the long-term legacy of the earlier reforms. This is illustrated by noting in Figure 10 the trajectory of the green lines (academic junior secondaries) for medium-SES students. These schools were particularly effective in the late-1980s and 1990s

for people of medium SES, while also being as effective as the oldest schools for low-SES and high-SES students.

The virtues of these former academic junior secondaries were not limited to that. Figure 11 looks at breadth of curricular attainment, now including also independent schools. The academic junior secondaries were as effective as the old secondaries in providing breadth (green and solid red lines). Indeed, for high-SES students, they were almost as effective as the selective independent schools, especially for females.

Figure 11: percentage attaining curricular breadth at mid-secondary level, by sex, socio-economic status, and selected school origin, 1952-1998



Conclusions

Thus institutions matter, but also the legacies of institutions interact with each other, and interact with the intentions of policy makers. These legacies are not themselves unchanging, and policy can have an effect because it can modify the ways in which a legacy has an impact. The old secondary schools sustained an advantage in attainment right through the period when comprehensive schools were being introduced, but then they were guided by policy into a common system of secondary schooling by means, probably, of the common curricular framework of the 1980s and 1990s.

Moreover, the influence can go the other way: some institutions can intensify the effects of policy, as we saw with those former junior secondaries which had long had a tradition of teaching academic subjects, often in conflict with official discouragement. These academic junior secondaries show that a tradition can be a source of change as well as of resistance to it.

The analysis suggests that policies which work with the grain of a school's ethos are more likely to succeed in that school than policies which seek to transform it. The academic junior secondaries were perhaps closer than any other group of schools to the national Scottish policy of a comprehensive education that was firmly based on widening access to academic courses.

There are implications of the analysis for how to understand the ways in which policy operates. Policy can take a very long time to have its intended effect, and in the short term might even seem to have failed. For example, we noted that during the initial shift to comprehensive schooling the socio-economic gap in attainment at high levels widened. But, twenty years later, there had been a clear

narrowing. No short-term evaluation could have picked this up. This leads to the final policy conclusion, which is also a conclusion about history. Policy is rarely cast in isolation: it proceeds incrementally. The institutional effects of the 1960s and 1970s could be understood only by paying attention also to the legacies of older reforms, and the ultimate effects of comprehensive schooling were still being worked through 35 years after the policy was inaugurated.

Main references

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