

Education Expansion and its Influences on Social Class and Intergenerational Social Mobility in the Taiwanese Society

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Taiwan has undergone two waves of education expansion over the last 50 years: in 1968, the 6-year compulsory education was extended to 9 years; in the late 1980s, government started to increase the number of public higher education institutions and allow the fast expansion in numbers of private higher education institutions. The extension of 9-year compulsory education was exceptionally beneficial to the Taiwanese women born after late 1950s because, without the 9-year compulsory education, large number of women would not have the chance to attend junior high school and, hence, never have an opportunity to receive higher education (Luo & Chen, 2018). With the help of 9-year compulsory education, the overall educational attainment of Taiwanese women, as well as the entire population, was raised thereafter. Figure 1 delineates the net enrollment ratios over the last decades in Taiwan. While the enrollment ratio of primary education have been stably close to 100% during this period of time, the enrollment ratios of junior high school and senior high school have been steadily climbing up (Directorate-General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics, 2018). The enrollment ratio of junior high school has increased to more than 96% since 2005, and that of senior high school has ascended to more than 90% since 2006. Before 1990, the net enrollment rate of higher education in Taiwan was generally below 20%, but with the increase in number of colleges and universities since late 1980s, there has been a sharp rise in the ratio of higher education enrollment from about 20% in 1990 to more than 70% in 2017. The implementation of extended compulsory education and higher education expansion accounted for the increase of these enrollment ratios.

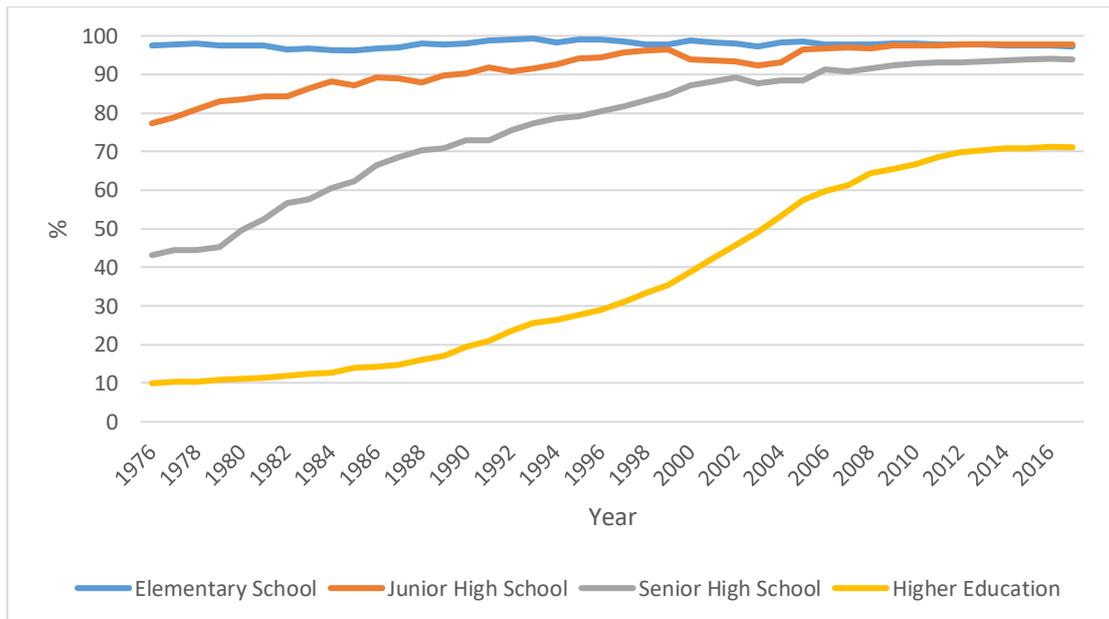


Fig. 1. Net Enrollment Ratio: 1976-2017.

Source: Directorate-General of Budget, Accounting and Statistics. (2018). National Statistics.

Executive Yuan, Taiwan. Retrieved from

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Individual's level of educational attainment is highly related to one's social status in the society (Chuang & Chen, 2011; Hout & DiPrete, 2006): Regardless of one's original family status, through obtaining higher level of educational attainment, one would have better opportunity to promote his/her social status. In Taiwan, people with higher level of educational attainment, especially those with college/university degrees, are more likely to identify themselves as middle- or upper-middle classes (Chuang & Chen, 2011; Lin, 2013). Since the two waves of education expansion in Taiwan have raised the overall level of educational attainment for its citizens, it is reasonable to assume that, education expansion would change the pattern of self-identified social class among Taiwanese people across time. Thus, the first research goal is, using a nationally representative telephone interview data, to examine the effect of education expansion on the distribution of self-identified social class among the respondents across time. It is hypothesized that, with the increased level of higher education attainment over the last 20 years, the percentage of Taiwanese

citizens with upper-middle class self-identification would increase accordingly.

Individual's level of educational attainment is also highly related to one's family social status during childhood and adolescence (Chou, 2008). Children born in affluent family, with parents holding higher levels of educational attainment and well-paid jobs, tend to have better opportunities to obtain higher levels of educational attainment as well and achieve higher social status (Chuang & Chen, 2011). Nevertheless, with the extensive expansion of educational opportunities in attending colleges and universities, more adolescents, even if they are from disadvantaged backgrounds, can have access of higher education and eventually obtain a degree. Thus education expansion could serve as a means of enhancing equal opportunity in educational attainment for all citizens regardless of their original social status and, in such way, it is crucial to the maintaining of free social mobility in the society. Having a hope that one's social status could be changed as a result of one's hard work and efforts through gaining higher educational attainment and obtaining a good job with nice pay is fundamental for all citizens, especially for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. With such a hope, young people would endure hardship and conquer obstacles as long as they believe their efforts will pay off someday in the future. On the contrary, if in a country, people believed that no matter how hard they work, it is impossible for them to promote their original social status, a feeling of relative deprivation would exist among people from different social classes. In the long run, the overall social stability and unity among citizens of such country might be affected and the belief in the existence of social justice will deteriorate. In Taiwan, with the higher education expansion, it is hypothesized that, individuals, especially those of the younger cohorts, should exhibit rise in percentage of higher education attainment regardless of their parents' level of educational attainment. Hence, in this study, researchers want to investigate whether upward intergenerational social mobility, measured in terms of the improvement in level of educational attainment observed in children as compared to their fathers, could be observed in our respondents. This is the second research goal of the study.

As the expansion of educational opportunities occurred during the past fifty years in Taiwan, especially after 1980s when college enrollment rates rose

steeply, the basic educational requirements for the young people to obtain a nice job have been raised. Without a college/university diploma, it is rather difficult to secure a decent job nowadays. Consequently, Taiwanese parents would try their best to send children to college for the hope that their children would have better chances to obtain great jobs. However, as the college admission rates rose to almost near 100% in Taiwan for the last 10 years, most of the younger cohorts of Taiwanese population hold a bachelor's degree and the degree can be conferred by a public university, a private university, or a vocational/technological university (Luo & Chen, 2018). Holding a masters' degree becomes a common phenomenon for young adults in Taiwan as well. However, expansion of educational opportunities is not necessarily a positive matter if the number of degree-granting educational institutions were not controlled and carefully monitored overtime. Over-expansion of higher education opportunities in the last two decades brought a dramatic change in Taiwanese job market. For the younger cohorts, having a college degree no longer automatically guarantees for decent jobs, employers generally expect their employees at least holds a college degree, but the types of university the young adults attended and the majors they studied greatly affected their chances of obtaining well-pay jobs (Lin, 2015). Young adults from disadvantaged family backgrounds are even more likely to face the dilemma: Due to lack of family resources, they need study loans to support them through college years, but after graduation, the college degrees from private institutions they earned may not help them to find good jobs or to enter graduate schools, thus these young adults are bond by debts and works with low-pays that do not guarantee a bright future (Chang & Lin, 2015; Lin, 2015). Consequently, over the last decade, tensions have gradually emerged as people of lower social classes and young adults felt that they were deprived of the chance to change their social status due to worsen economical situations, stagnant wage, inflation, exorbitant real-estate prices, degree deflation, and the relatively higher unemployment rates in Taiwan (Lin, 2013, 2015). Thus, the third research goal of the study is to examine, after the over-expansion of higher education in the last decade, is the level of educational attainment still a good predictor of one's social class in Taiwan? Do people with higher education degrees actually claim themselves as belonging to a better

social class as well? Is upward intergenerational social mobility still could be observed? Survey data from a nationally representative sample will be utilized to assess the influences of education expansion on respondents' educational attainments and self-identified social class. Statistical analyses will be conducted to see if the rise in educational attainment as the consequence of education expansion results in higher social class self-identification and upward intergenerational social mobility in Taiwan? Or educational attainment already loses its power in predicting one's social class in the young cohorts due to over-expansion of higher education?

Methodology

Data Source

In order to examine the possible impact of education expansion on people's social class, we analyze a telephone survey data set. This telephone survey was administered in April 2018. The survey population comprised all citizens in Taiwan, and a nationally representative list of landline phone numbers was adopted to contact the respondents. Prior to the interview, if there were more than one, the number of adults living in each household was ascertained before randomly selecting one of the adults, as the selected respondents. The selected respondents were invited to participate, and 1228 respondents were successfully interviewed in this survey.

Analysis Strategy

All respondents are classified into four generations in accordance with the stage of education expansion in Taiwan. Compulsory education in Taiwan was extended from 6 to 9 years in 1968, so quite a few respondents who were born before 1955 did not attend junior high school because secondary education was not mandatory when they graduated from primary school at the age of 12. This group of respondents make up the generation of "6-year compulsory education." The second generation is composed of those born between 1956 and 1967, this group of respondents received more education than the previous one because of the extension of compulsory education. However, the chance for this generation to go to college was limited because of the scarcity of college enrollment quota.

This generation is thus denominated as the generation of “9-year compulsory education.” The third generation is comprised of the respondents born between 1968 and 1980. Compared to their older counterparts, these respondents were more likely to receive higher education because higher education began to expand in the early 1990s when this generation turned into their early adulthood. This generation is named the generation of “during expansion.” The youngest generation is composed of respondents born after 1991. This generation of “after expansion” has had the highest college enrollment ratio resulting from the continued higher education expansion.

Results and Discussion

Figure 2 presents the change in the distribution of the highest level of educational attainment obtained among the four groups of respondents. Whereas the proportions of the two bottom blocks representing the two lowest levels of educational attainment are progressively reduced from the oldest generation to the youngest generation, the proportions of the two top levels of educational attainment show an opposite trend. Members of the younger generations receive more education than those of the older generations. About 15% of respondents in the generation of 6-year compulsory education have a college degree or postgraduate degree. This percentage is increased to about 23%, 39%, and 67% respectively in the three younger generations. The above change witnesses the impact of education expansion on citizens’ educational attainment.

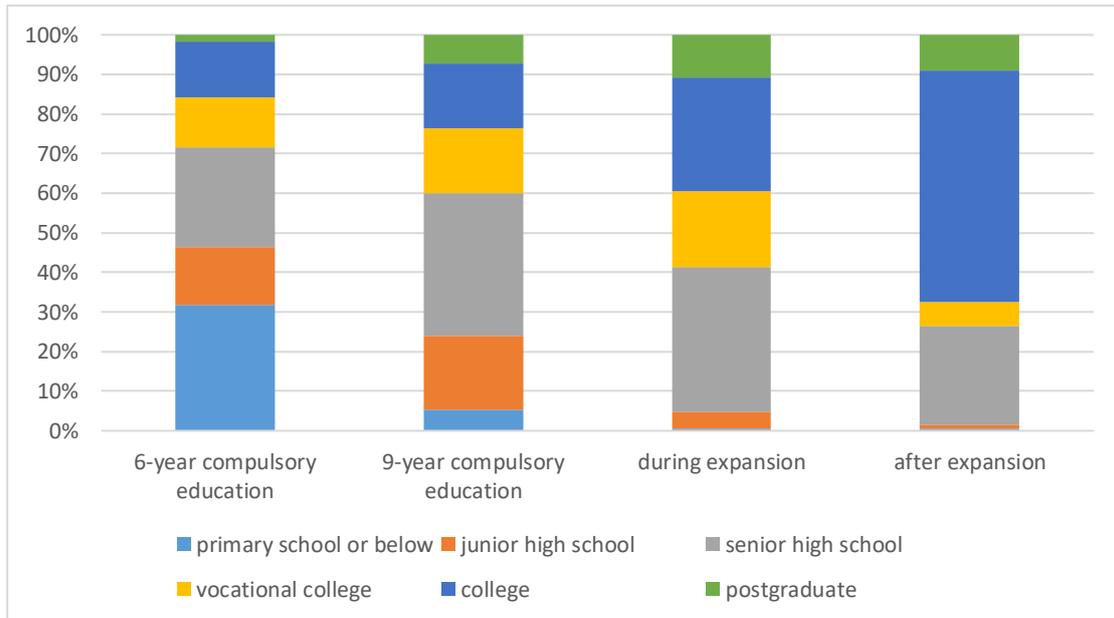


Fig. 2. Education Expansion and Educational Attainment

Given the close relationship between educational attainment and social class, it is expected that the distribution of social class would have changed as a result of the education expansion and the accompanied increase in educational attainment. Specifically, it is hypothesized there should be more upper middle class respondents in the younger generations than in the older generations because of the increasing levels of educational attainment. Figure 3 shows the distribution of social class among the four generations of respondents, which does not tally with the hypothesis. A significant difference does exist between the generation of 6-year compulsory education and the three younger generations regarding the distribution of social class. There are more respondents in the oldest generation claimed that they belong to the lower class as compared to that in the three younger generations. Nevertheless, the three younger generations share almost similar patterns of distribution with regard to their social class self-identification, though patterns of educational attainment significantly differs among these three generations. It seems that the extension of compulsory education taking effect in 1968 not only raised people's educational attainment but also promoted their social class. However, the sharp rise in levels of educational attainment observed in the three younger generations did not bring about upward social mobility in these three generations. This result concerns us because it is against the original hypothesis. In the younger generations, the rise

in educational attainment did not bring forth promoted social class self-identification. Thus although most young adults in Taiwan generally have college diploma, they still do not claim themselves as upper-middle class, instead they describe themselves as the working class. Why increased levels of educational attainment resulting from the higher education expansion does not induce upward social mobility in the younger generations?



Fig. 3. Education Expansion and Social Class

Taiwan is a society heavily influenced by Confucius values, and the importance of education on facilitating individuals' career development is stressed. Parents usually hold the belief that they should make all efforts to support their children to receive more education in order for their children to achieve upward social mobility. This belief is based on the idea that higher level of educational attainment is contributive to upward social mobility. Therefore, the analyses afterwards will focus on the weakening relationship between educational attainment and social class status.

The puzzle can be solved by a simple hypothesis: over-expansion in higher education actually devalues college degree in such a way that higher education attainment loses its power to raise one's social status. However, it remains unclear why some college graduates have a higher social class self-identification, but others don't. While some people acquire a higher social status by their own

talents or efforts, others inherit a higher social status because they walk in the shadow of their families, and still others obtain a higher social standing because of a combination of the above factors. Given the substantial effect of family social status on one's educational attainment as well as the close relationship between educational attainment and social class, the relationships between self-identified social class and education attainment of one's own and that of the parents are examined in the first place.

Results are presented in Figure 4. The value of Somers' D is used to measure the differential effects of respondents' and their parents' educational attainment on respondents' social class observed among the four generations classified. While the correlation between respondents' self-identified social class and their own educational attainment for the first generation is .355, it reaches the highest value, .395, in the second generation, and then falls to .291 and .180 respectively for the two younger generations, thus level of educational attainment produces the largest effect on social status in the generation of 9-year compulsory education. However, the diminishing association between individuals' own education and social class in the two younger generations illustrates the ineffectiveness of the higher education expansion in promoting social status. In addition, it is worth noting that the impact of respondents' own and parents' educational attainment on social status moves in the opposite direction between the first two generations. This discrepancy indicates that the implementation of 9-year compulsory education provided people who had good academic performance a better chance to raise their social status. Meanwhile, the extension of compulsory education shrank the impact of familial factors on social status. In other words, because of the extended compulsory education, members of the '9-year compulsory education' generation were more likely to climb up to a higher social status through acquiring a higher level of educational attainment.

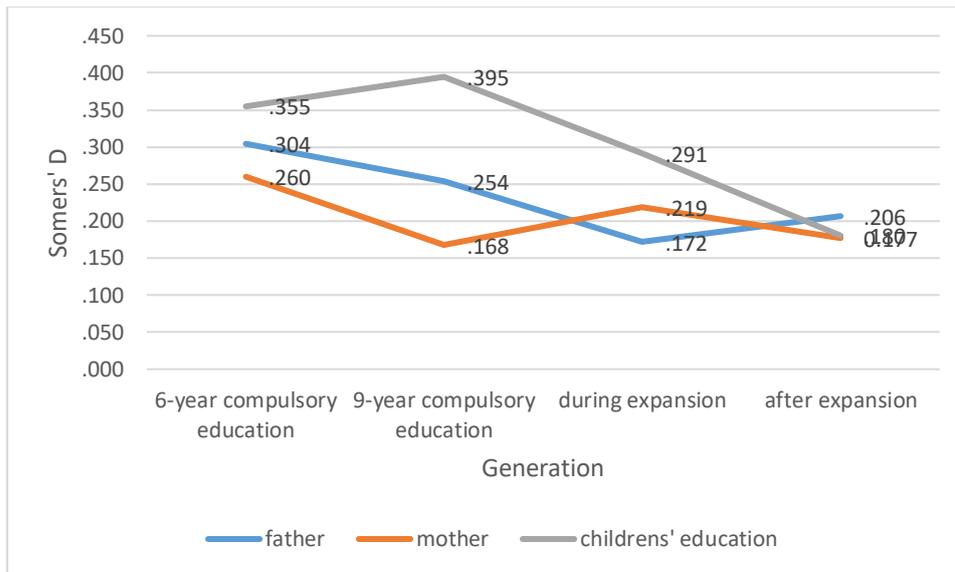


Fig. 4. Educational Attainment and Social Class

However, the expansion of higher education did not produce the same effect as the extension of compulsory education. The impact of one's own educational attainment on self-identified social class keeps falling in the two younger generations, parents' educational attainment sustains its influence. So far, a person's family background and educational attainment are both contributive to his or her social status. However, if the trend observed between the two younger generations continues, a person's social status will become dependent on their family background rather than on individuals' own efforts and talents in the future generations.

In conclusion, the above analysis seems indicating that education has been losing its power of shaping people's social status. While researchers tend to take a vertical perspective when describing educational attainment and emphasize the increase in level of educational attainment and its positive effects on social status, the possible horizontal inequality between subgroups of students attending different types of higher education institutions is ignored. The issue of homogeneity or heterogeneity among individuals with the same level of education deserves more attention. Because public higher education institutions are usually thought as superior than the private schools, senior high school students who have better academic performance tend to go to public schools. Therefore, whether the college graduates receives their degrees from a public school or a private one deserves attention. The following analysis takes this issue

into consideration to examine whether the expanded higher education opportunities improves respondents' chances of achieving upward social mobility.

If viewing from the perspective of the vertical measure of educational attainment, the expansion of higher education seems to promote equality among individuals with varied family backgrounds. It is shown in Figure 5 that respondents' educational attainment is positively correlated with their fathers' level of educational attainment. Individuals with better educated parents are more likely to have a college degree¹. However, the pattern in the generation of 'after expansion' is quite different from the three older generations. The linear relationship in the youngest generation becomes less evident. While the chance for a person with less educated father to receive a college degree is quite low in general, this is not true in the youngest generation. It is common for the members of the youngest generation to go to college regardless of their fathers' educational attainment. The gap between those whose fathers have a college degree and those whose fathers don't have a college degree narrows in the youngest generation. The narrowed gap in this generation seems an affirmative evidence that the expansion of higher education has brought about better chance of achieving upward social mobility and equality in educational attainment regardless of individuals' original familial social status.

¹ Because there are few fathers whose graduated from vocational college in the first two generation, 5 and 7 in the first and second generation, these cases are excluded from analysis.

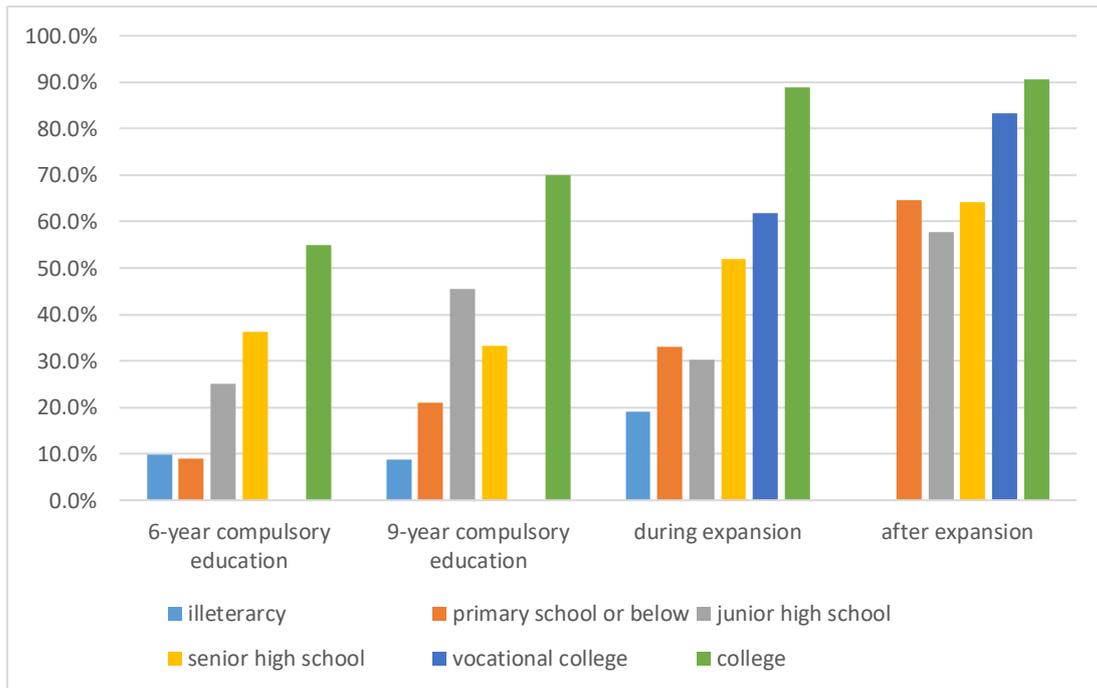


Fig. 5. Father's Education and Children's Percentage of Receiving Higher Education

However, by taking the horizontal perspective of educational attainment into consideration, a different picture emerged. Figure 6 displays the percentage of respondents who have attended a public university in accordance with their fathers' educational attainment. For members of the two generations prior to the expansion of higher education, it is uncommon for them to receive a degree from a public university, and it is particularly rare for those whose fathers were poorly educated to attend public universities. For the younger generations, the chance of receiving a degree from public universities has been substantially increased. However, the increase in opportunities is not evenly distributed across different groups. Based on Figure 6, after higher education expansion, only respondents whose fathers were college educated benefited from the expanded opportunities of entering public universities.

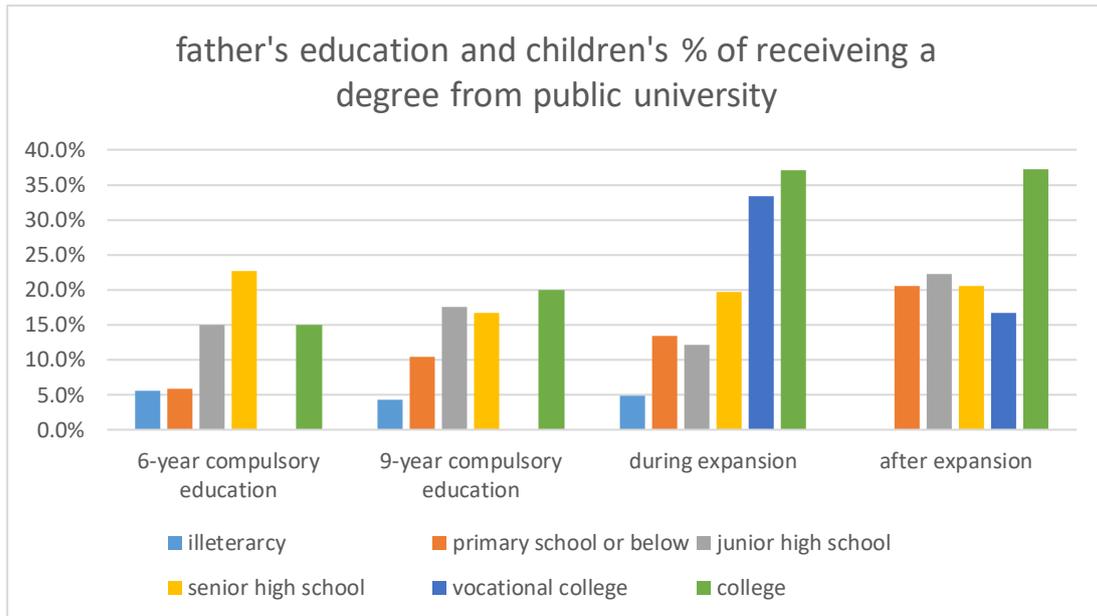


Fig. 6. Father's Education and Children's Percentage of Receiving a Degree from Public University

Does attending a public or a private university make a difference on social status? Figure 7 presents the percentage of respondents, who self-identified as members of upper-middle class, by types of higher education institutions attended across the four generations being studied. Individuals without a college degree generally would not self-identify themselves as the upper-middle class in all four generations studied. Whereas those who have a college degree, either granted by a private or a public institution, are significantly more likely to identify themselves as the upper-middle class ($p < .001$). There exists no significant difference between private college graduates and public college graduates in terms of the percentage self-identified as the upper-middle class in all but the youngest generation. For college graduates of the youngest generation, possessing a degree granted by a public university makes them significantly more likely to self-identify themselves as belonging to the higher social class than their counterparts with private university degrees ($p < .05$).

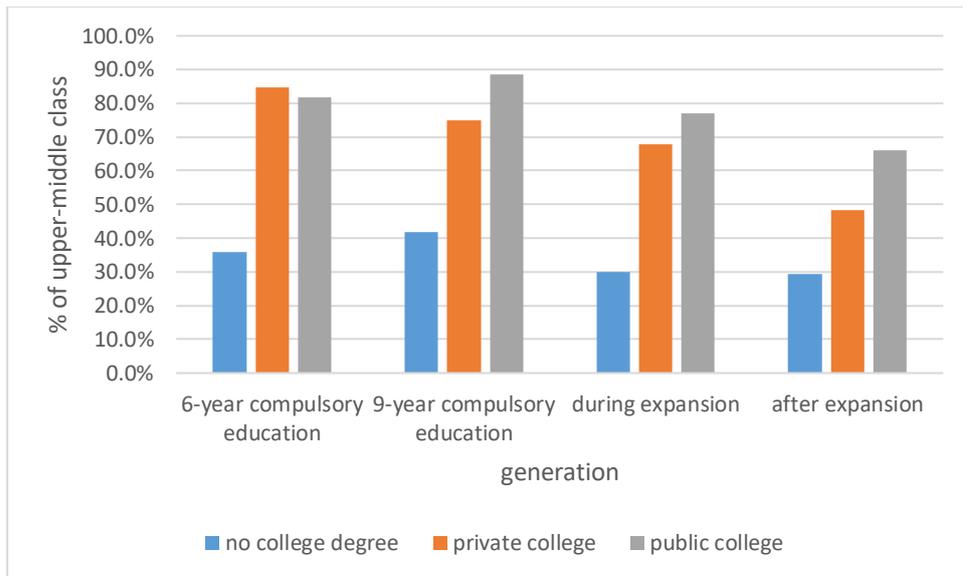


Fig. 7. College Degree and Social Class

In conclusion, the over-expansion of higher education did not terminate the inequality existing between individuals with different family backgrounds. Instead, results presented in Figure 5, 6 and 7 indicates that, when educational attainment is measured vertically, it seems that higher education expansion has helped Taiwanese citizens to have access to higher education regardless of individuals' original familial factors; however, if higher education attainment is examined horizontally, it is obvious that familial factors are crucial in determining who could attend a public university. Individuals with college educated fathers are substantially privileged in gaining admission to the public universities in Taiwan. Consequently, the expansion of higher education has retained the educational attainment inequality that used to appear between individuals with different family backgrounds, but the inequality does not exist vertically in terms of the highest levels of educational attainment individuals can achieve, but exist horizontally in terms of which type of university diploma (public/private; elite/normal) individuals finally possess.

Conclusion

The proposed answers for the three research questions asked are presented below:

(1) When extended compulsory education was implemented in Taiwan, the overall levels of educational attainment achieved by Taiwanese citizens were significantly improved, the percentage of citizens self-identified as upper-middle class was also increased.

(2) When expansion of higher education occurs in Taiwan, almost all senior high school students can enter universities such that, no matter their fathers' levels of educational attainment, individuals showed upward social mobility by improving their levels of educational attainment as compared with their fathers.

(3) When over-expansion of higher education occurs, possessing a university degree is no longer privileged, thus university degree is devalued in the society, unless the university diploma one possesses is granted by the elite public universities. Public university diploma holders in general are those who can find well-paid jobs and those more likely to regard themselves as upper-middle class members. But the percentage of college graduates from private institutions self-claimed as the upper-middle class actually decreased with the extended higher education opportunities available. In addition, fathers' educational attainment was found to be a determinant of the types of higher education institutions offspring attended such that offspring of well-educated fathers were privileged with better chance of entering public universities. Consequently, equality in educational attainment seems to achieve when looking vertically at the levels of highest educational attainment gained by Taiwanese citizens. But, in reality, by looking at educational attainments in terms of the types of university one attends with regards to the influence of fathers' educational attainment, it is obvious that individuals with well-educated fathers are far more likely to obtain public universities degrees compared to counterparts with less educated fathers. Thus, inequality in educational attainment was masked.

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