



## THE ROLE OF EDUCATION IN THE SOCIAL MOBILITY OF POOR CHILDREN IN URBAN SETTINGS

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### Abstract

This article discusses education and social mobility among poor urban children of second generation migrants. It develops a conceptual account of how schooling may contribute to breaking intergenerational poverty chains, while acknowledging the constraints faced by families living in dense low income neighbourhoods. Education is viewed as a source of cultural and symbolic resources that can widen aspirations, shape identities, and open access to formal employment. At the same time, limited family income, weak social networks, and the segmentation of urban labour markets restrict the extent to which certificates can be translated into upward movement. The paper highlights the ambiguous position of second generation migrants, who inherit narratives of sacrifice from their parents yet encounter unequal opportunities in city schools and workplaces. By synthesising these dimensions, the article argues that education can support gradual mobility for a portion of poor urban youth, though its capacity to sever poverty across generations depends on the interaction between school experiences, family support, and the broader structure of opportunity.

Keywords: education, social mobility, urban poverty, second generation migrants, poor children, schooling, intergenerational poverty.

## Introduction

The development of major cities creates a social space marked by sharp contrasts between luxury and the limitations of life. On one hand, the city is perceived as a place of opportunity, where education, employment, and public services are available with a wide variety of choices. On the other hand, densely populated settlements with low environmental quality house families struggling to maintain daily life. This phenomenon often triggers social segregation and patterns of poverty that concentrate in specific points within metropolitan areas (Fauzi, 2021). Children from urban poor families grow up amidst hopes of rising in social class, yet simultaneously face visible boundaries in the form of low parental income, cramped living spaces, and limited access to proper learning facilities. They observe school as a space promising a different future, while the reality at home shows a pattern of parental hard work that is not always accompanied by an improvement in social position. This tension between hope and reality becomes the backdrop of daily life for the younger generation in urban pockets of poverty.

Intergenerational migration from villages to cities produces a new social configuration in the form of second-generation urban migrants children who no longer experience direct geographical displacement but live within the structural consequences of their parents' migration. Urbanization is often understood as a family strategy to increase economic welfare; however, classic research shows that early migrants are generally absorbed into the informal sector with low job stability and limited social protection (Todaro, 1969). The problem is that this uneven population movement process often widens the gap of social inequality within the urban environment (Mardikaningsih, 2021). Parents carry hopes of social mobility through the city, but limited formal education and skills keep them within vulnerable economic layers. Within the framework of urban marginality theory, this condition creates an urban working class that survives through subsistence economic strategies without significant opportunities for mobility (Portes & Hoffman, 2003). Furthermore, in more extreme conditions, this economic helplessness can force children onto the streets and trap them in a cycle of vulnerability that is difficult to break (Aidan Bin Abdullah, 2021). Children born in the city then inherit

this social position while simultaneously facing new demands from the modern urban environment.

Unlike the parental generation, urban migrant children experience institutional socialization through formal education from an early age. Schools introduce the language of modern aspiration in the form of academic achievement, professionalism, and the idea of meritocracy-based mobility (Coleman, 1988). However, daily experience at home reveals a reality of economic struggle that does not always align with the promises of education. The tension between school values and family survival practices creates what is known as cultural dissonance a conflict between household habitus and the demands of educational institutions (Bourdieu, 1986). Additionally, they must also be clever in navigating themselves so that traditional family values are maintained amidst a modern urban lifestyle (Amri & Khayru, 2022). This internal struggle becomes a hallmark of the experience of the urban poor child who must navigate two social worlds with different languages of values.

Education is often praised as a means to break the chain of intergenerational poverty. This idea stems from the belief that certain diplomas open access to more stable formal employment, thereby enabling improvements in income and social status (Ding, 2017). Therefore, it is crucial for all parties to ensure that a child's right to education and health is truly protected by law (Hariani et al., 2021). Within this framework, urban poor children are seen as subjects who can change the family's fate through success in school. However, their educational journey does not take place in a vacuum. Densely populated living environments, limited study space, demands to assist the family economy, and limited cultural capital are parts of the daily life that influence how they experience school (Jialing, 2012). Often, parents at home also strive with all their might to provide value education so that their children have strong life guidelines (Safira, et al., 2022). Social mobility does not emerge solely as the fruit of individual ability, but rather as the result of interactions between educational institutions, job opportunity structures, and the social networks available to them.

The question regarding the extent to which education is able to change the social position of children from urban poor families becomes highly relevant when observing the experience of second-generation

migrants. They do not experience geographical displacement like their parents but grow up as urban citizens with a social status that is frequently marginalized. Opportunities to obtain a proper education are often still hindered by various economic and social factors in developing countries (Rojak & Khayru, 2022). Access to primary and secondary schools may be broader than in previous generations, but the quality of the learning experience, family support, and realistic expectations regarding the future vary greatly. A child who demonstrates good academic achievement may feel symbolic recognition at school, but that recognition is not necessarily converted into real social mobility opportunities after graduation (Guerrero, 2019). Moreover, at higher levels of education, the challenge is no longer just about learning, but how to build global awareness to compete more broadly (Hariani & Mardikaningsih, 2022). Here, education can function as a space for the production of aspirations as well as a space for the reproduction of inequality when the opportunity to continue to higher levels is limited by the family's economic capacity.

In a society that increasingly positions diplomas as a prerequisite for entering the formal labor market, the younger generation from urban poor families realizes they need specific educational certificates to avoid reproducing the informal work performed by their parents (Oyolola & Abuya, 2014). However, the dynamics of urban life are also influenced by how society participates in determining the direction of public policy and social movements (Rojak et al., 2021). The path toward such diplomas is full of intersections. They often struggle with learning disruptions, the potential for dropping out, or the choice to enter the job market sooner to support family income. Meanwhile, educational institutions frequently establish performance standards and discipline that do not fully consider the household burdens of poor children (Nonnenmacher, 2017). This demands that school organizations become more flexible and adaptive in facing the economic uncertainty experienced by students (Arifin & Darmawan, 2022). In this situation, education stands in an ambiguous position. On one hand, it can open the door to social mobility. On the other hand, it risks becoming a selection mechanism that groups poor children into narrow academic tracks that are less effective for changing their social position.

The problems arising from this description relate to the question of whether education truly functions as an escape route from structural poverty for second-generation urban migrant children. On one side, there is a normative belief that schools provide the cognitive capacity, skills, and work values required by the formal labor market. Understanding organizational behavior in the workplace also becomes important for them to learn so they can adapt later (Darmawan, 2013). On the other side, the lives of poor urban families show a continuation of low-wage informal work that is implicitly passed down to children. When access to higher education is limited, children who complete secondary school often still face a narrow job market, fierce competition, and discrimination based on address, accent, or social networks. In many cases, family issues such as custody after divorce can also become an additional burden on a child's psychological development and academic focus (Fajar et al., 2021). Under these circumstances, primary and secondary education may be sufficient to avoid the harshest forms of exploitation, but it does not necessarily lift them to a significantly different social class.

Another problem concerns how the quality of the educational experience received by urban poor children affects their likelihood of utilizing a diploma as capital for social mobility. Schools in densely populated residential environments often face limited facilities, high teacher-student ratios, and low expectations for academic achievement. Children who come to class exhausted after helping with household chores or family businesses find it difficult to follow a learning rhythm that demands long concentration. On the other hand, the curriculum may not explicitly prepare them to face the reality of the dynamic urban job market. In fact, education should be able to sustainably change student behavior and build awareness of a better future (Gautama & Mardikaningsih, 2022). Consequently, formal education risks becoming an administrative routine that produces diplomas without delivering the actual capacity to negotiate positions in the modern world of work.

The urgency of compiling a literature study on the education and social mobility of second-generation urban migrant poor children lies in the need to restructure perspectives on the relationship between schooling and the opportunity to escape poverty. In public discourse, education is often positioned as a singular, automatic answer. Yet, the

experiences of children from urban poor families show that the relationship between education and social mobility is influenced by many structural and cultural factors. A literature-based study examining various theoretical views on urban poverty, the functions of education, and intergenerational mobility can help build a more cautious and reflective framework of thought. In this way, educational policies and practices will not only focus on expanding access but also pay attention to the quality of the learning experience and its relevance to realistic social mobility paths for urban poor children.

## Method

This paper is structured as a qualitative literature study aimed at developing conceptual reasoning regarding the relationship between education and the social mobility of the urban poor. Gomm (2008) emphasizes that social research methodology demands clarity regarding how researchers formulate questions, select sources, and organize arguments. Departing from this view, this writing begins with the formulation of a question concerning the extent to which education functions as a means of breaking the cycle of poverty for second-generation migrants in urban environments. That question is then broken down into several key themes, including urban poverty, the social function of education, intergenerational mobility, and the experiences of children from poor families. Privitera and Ahlgrim Delzell (2018) remind us that educational research requires sensitivity to the relationship between research design and ultimate goals, so the selection of reading materials is directed toward works that review the social and psychological dimensions of the educational process, rather than just the technical aspects of teaching.

Singleton and Straits (2018) emphasize the importance of a systematic approach in tracing reading sources and organizing them into an orderly framework of thought. In that spirit, the collected materials are grouped into several clusters, such as writings on social mobility theory, studies on urban poverty, research on education for vulnerable groups, and discussions regarding second-generation migrants. Crano et al. (2014) state that the construction of a theoretical framework demands the ability to link seemingly separate concepts to produce a cohesive understanding.

Gagnon (2010) describes case studies as a way of viewing an entity holistically, and this approach inspires the way of viewing the urban poor as a group with distinct experiences, even though this research does not collect field data. This literature study is treated as a process of organizing ideas regarding education and social mobility through a critical reading of various sources that complement each other.

## Result and Discussion

Education for second-generation urban migrant poor children is often seen as the sole source of hope to escape the cycle of low-wage informal work performed by their parents. However, for education to truly become a vehicle for social mobility, their school experience needs to be examined as a process that touches their way of thinking, their view of the future, and their positioning within the urban social structure. Fundamentally, the success of a learning system cannot be separated from how educational management is administered to support the potential of every student (Akmal et al., 2015). Schools introduce a new vocabulary regarding ambitions, professions, and success. Teachers encourage students to aspire to be respected professionals, while at home, children witness their parents working in sectors that are undervalued despite requiring significant physical labor. This tension creates a space for reflection in the child's mind as to whether the educational path truly opens another way, or merely provides a new language to describe a fate not much different from the previous generation.

Education functions as a source of cultural capital when urban poor children gain the opportunity to internalize communication patterns, interaction styles, and thinking orientations valued by modern institutions. The concept of cultural capital explains that educational success depends not only on intellectual ability but also on the mastery of dominant cultural codes, such as the ability to argue, academic literacy, and self-confidence in formal spaces (Bourdieu, 1986). In addition to academic abilities, interactions at school also play a major role in fostering children's social competencies so they can be more flexible in social circles (Hariani et al., 2021). Through school, children learn to speak with legitimate language structures, understand professional norms, and build career imaginations that were previously absent in the

family environment. In ideal conditions, education becomes a mechanism for reproducing social opportunities that open access to formal employment and vertical mobility.

However, the distribution of cultural capital occurs unevenly because the material conditions of the household affect the sustainability of academic practices outside of school. Studies on educational inequality show that the domestic learning environment has a major influence on student achievement, including the availability of study space, family support, and access to reading materials (Lareau, 2003). Certainly, there are many external factors that can tangibly influence the fluctuations in a student's learning achievement at school (Mardikaningsih, 2014). Children living in crowded housing, without learning facilities, and with high domestic demands experience difficulty maintaining the study habits honed at school. Consequently, the knowledge acquired in class is not fully internalized as a long-term disposition, causing education to lose its transformational power as a source of new social strength.

Social mobility through education requires a bridge between the world of school and the world of work. For the urban poor, this bridge is often fragile due to the limited social networks possessed by the family. Parents who work as daily laborers, street vendors, or domestic workers do not have the connections that can help children enter the formal workforce. This burden is often felt more heavily by mothers who must work while still managing household needs within the existing social structure (Khairi, 2021). Meanwhile, the schools they attend may not have strong career counseling programs or networks with business actors willing to accept graduates from poor environments. As a result, even if children complete secondary education, they face difficulties finding jobs that match the capacity acquired from school. In this situation, education does indeed increase individual capacity, but the conversion of that capacity into vertical mobility does not occur automatically.

Education also plays a vital role in shaping the future aspirations of the urban poor. Schools convey a normative narrative that academic hard work will result in social mobility, an idea rooted in the ideology of modern meritocracy (Young, 1958). The hope is that if they successfully enter the formal sector, decent welfare will enhance their work performance in

serving the community (Gautama et al., 2021). Teachers, curricula, and textbooks present a promising vision of the future through professional careers and education-based economic success. From the perspective of the sociology of education, schools function as institutions that shape the "capacity to aspire," directing individuals toward social mobility projects (Appadurai, 2004). Children absorb the message that education is the rational path to escaping structural poverty.

However, daily empirical experience often reveals a gap between aspirations and real opportunities. When children witness their parents working hard without any significant change in social position, an ambivalence toward the promise of education emerges. Research on working-class aspirations shows that the misalignment between institutional expectations and structural reality can produce both high motivation and a skeptical attitude toward the educational system (MacLeod, 2009). This condition indicates the need for balance in public policy so that economic and social aspects can move in tandem for the welfare of the community (Mardikaningsih & Hariani, 2021). In this situation, education becomes an arena for both the production of aspirations and the production of social disappointment, especially when economic barriers, discrimination, and limited social networks hinder the realization of promised mobility. Legally, government policies should ideally have a strong foundation to guarantee social justice for all layers of citizens (Rizky & Udjari, 2021).

Second-generation urban migrants occupy a unique position because they have no lived experience in the village, yet they inherit the narrative of their parents' struggle in leaving their hometowns for a hopefully better future. For them, education is not only about personal life improvement but also a justification for the family's migration decision. Furthermore, awareness of the importance of maintaining their living environment also becomes part of the values they begin to understand in the city (Nuraini et al., 2021). If they succeed in achieving more stable and respectable jobs, their parents' migration is seen as fruitful. If they end up in the same types of jobs or even more precarious ones than their parents, the narrative of mobility through migration and education experiences a rupture. In this situation, education carries a symbolic burden to prove that intergenerational sacrifice was not in vain,

such that the failure of mobility is not merely felt at an individual level but also touches the collective dignity of the family. Effective leadership in public services is necessary so that the aspirations of these ordinary citizens can be properly channeled (Rojak, 2021).

Formal education provides a framework of values that teaches meritocracy the idea that success is achieved through effort and ability. High-achieving urban poor children feel recognized through report card grades, awards, and praise from teachers. However, when they enter the world outside of school, they encounter labor recruitment mechanisms that often include residential addresses, appearance, and informal recommendations as considerations. In today's digital era, the challenges have increased as they are required to possess both technical skills and proficient social competence (Mendonca et al., 2021). If children from slum settlements feel looked down upon during the job selection process, they experience a discrepancy between the principles taught in school and the practices they face. This can create a feeling that education promises equality, yet the power of social networks and class prejudice continues to block the path to mobility. In the long run, this disappointment has the potential to diminish their belief in the value of schooling.

On the other hand, there is a possibility that education provides a more symbolic path of mobility before tangible economic mobility emerges. Poor children who obtain secondary or higher education can take on informal roles as interpreters of the outside world for their families and communities. They help parents understand official documents, fill out forms, and deal with bureaucracy. In fact, the local knowledge they possess from their families can often be integrated with the modern knowledge they acquire (Nurmalasari & Nuraini, 2021). This ability grants them a new status within the family, even if their income has not yet increased significantly. Such symbolic status can serve as an initial foundation for building broader networks in the future. However, if this new status is not followed by better income opportunities in the medium term, the child may experience role strain from being asked to assist with family affairs without gaining adequate economic autonomy.

The relationship between education and the social mobility of the urban poor is heavily influenced by the quality of pedagogical interaction between teachers and students. Teacher expectations have a significant

impact on students' academic development, as demonstrated by the Pygmalion effect, which explains that a teacher's positive expectations can improve a student's learning performance (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Students' creativity and critical thinking are also highly dependent on how teachers present subject matter in the classroom (Ramle, 2021). When students from poor backgrounds are perceived as having less potential, the pedagogical treatment provided often becomes minimal, both in terms of academic attention and self-development opportunities. This type of institutional bias indirectly reinforces the reproduction of educational inequality.

Conversely, teachers who apply an affirmative approach are able to transform schools into inclusive spaces for social mobility. Support in the form of additional academic guidance, scholarship information, and the strengthening of student self-confidence has been proven to increase the chances of educational success for vulnerable groups (Hattie, 2009). Schools that are sensitive to the socioeconomic backgrounds of students can function as compensatory agents against family inequality. Thus, educational institutions hold a strategic position in deciding whether to reproduce social stratification or, instead, mitigate the impact of poverty on learning opportunities.

Education can also influence the relationship patterns of urban poor children with peers from different social classes. In public or private schools with diverse student compositions, children from poor families interact with peers who have access to books, gadgets, and additional courses. Through this interaction, new communities or social networks are often formed based on shared interests in the urban environment (Rejeki, 2021). This interaction reveals the facility gap they possess, but simultaneously opens the possibility of social learning regarding speech styles, information on opportunities, and ways to access resources. Certain friendships can become gateways to networks that were previously closed. However, such interaction can also give rise to feelings of inferiority if the child constantly compares themselves to more established peers. The quality of social experience in school helps determine the extent to which education expands or narrows the inner horizons of the urban poor child.

In relation to the family, education places the urban poor child in a new bargaining position. Parents who did not complete formal education often pin their hopes on the child as the party who will one day be capable of lifting the family out of poverty. This family-centered education can also serve as a means to instill environmental awareness from an early age (Safira et al., 2022). This hope can be a powerful source of motivation, but simultaneously a heavy psychological pressure. The child feels responsible for the family's future, while the path toward decent employment appears long and fraught with uncertainty. When they face academic difficulties, failure is not merely realized as a personal matter but is felt as a threat to the collective hope of the family. On the other hand, existing social stereotypes in society often become an additional burden that hinders their opportunities to develop (Sajjapong et al., 2022). In such situations, emotional support from family and teachers is crucial, because without it, education risks turning into a painful burden.

The educational journey of urban poor children often goes hand in hand with the demand to work starting from school age. Involvement in informal work becomes a household strategy to maintain the family's economic sustainability, especially in the context of unstable urban poverty (Becker, 1964). This phenomenon demands a balance between individual freedom and collective responsibility in maintaining social solidarity (Saputra & Darmawan, 2021). Although the child's economic contribution helps the family, research shows that working while schooling correlates with a decrease in study time, chronic fatigue, and low academic achievement (Heady, 2003). Moreover, with current developments in technology and big data, the ways people work and socialize have changed significantly (Wahyudi et al., 2021). Children who must split their energy between economic responsibilities and educational demands face a double pressure not experienced by peers from more established families.

When schools fail to provide institutional flexibility toward these conditions, the risk of dropping out increases significantly. Studies on educational resilience emphasize that rigid educational systems often accelerate the exclusion of poor students rather than helping them persist (Rumberger, 2011). To address this, a role for legal advocacy with integrity is greatly needed to guarantee justice for the common people (Saktiawan

et al., 2021). Children who feel unable to meet academic standards eventually choose to leave school, not because of a lack of ability, but because of the structural conflict between life necessities and formal educational demands. In this regard, the effectiveness of government regulations in providing scholarships is vital so that educational access remains guaranteed for underprivileged families (Suwito et al., 2021). Under such conditions, education loses its emancipatory function and instead becomes a space that reveals the real boundaries of social mobility for the urban poor.

Despite many obstacles, there are also scenarios where education is able to create a real leap for some second-generation urban migrant poor children. This success is usually the result of a combination of personal perseverance, family support that despite being poor continues to prioritize school, relatively good school quality, and the existence of scholarship programs or other assistance. Besides formal schooling, non-formal education pathways can also be an alternative to build a more inclusive community future (Warin, 2022). Children who successfully break through to higher education or obtain vocational skills required by the job market have the chance to enter the formal workforce with a stable income. This situation allows them to help the family, change household consumption patterns, and break the cycle of dependence on informal work. However, such stories still tend to be selective, making it important to understand what conditions allow those paths to open so they are not treated merely as individual luck.

Education also has the potential to influence how second-generation urban migrants interpret their social identity. On one hand, schools introduce middle-class norms and lifestyles that become ideal benchmarks. This change often occurs alongside the expansion of urban settlements and the increasing daily mobility of citizens (Wisnujati & Mardikaningsih, 2021). Children begin to adopt musical tastes, clothing styles, and consumption preferences that differ from their parents. On the other hand, they remain anchored in densely populated environments with limited economic resources. This identity tension can drive some children to distance themselves from their origins, or conversely, strengthen their commitment to changing environmental conditions through the knowledge gained from school. This awareness often grows through the

active participation of citizens in managing environmental issues around them (Zulkarnain et al., 2021). In both possibilities, education influences how they view themselves, their families, and their communities, which in turn impacts the type of social mobility they pursue.

In a long-term perspective, social mobility through education for second-generation urban migrant poor children is not measured only by changes in income, but also by changes in aspiration patterns for the next generation. Children who successfully complete higher education compared to their parents have a greater opportunity to establish education as a value inherited by their own children in the future. Thus, even if the change in income for the current generation is not yet spectacular, a legacy in the form of an appreciation for learning and the ability to negotiate with formal institutions can become capital for the third generation. Ultimately, the cooperation of all parties is greatly needed so that every child has the same opportunity to achieve a brighter future. From this angle, education works gradually, creating slow but sustainable changes in how urban poor families manage resources, plan for the future, and value the importance of knowledge for daily life.

## Conclusion

The relationship between education and the social mobility of second-generation urban migrant poor children is complex and multifaceted. Education has the potential to provide the cultural, symbolic, and economic capital necessary to escape the informal labor inherited from their parents; however, the realization of this potential is heavily influenced by the quality of the school experience, family support, social networks, and the structure of job opportunities in the city. For some children, education opens the door to formal employment and a tangible shift in social positioning. For others, education ends at the granting of a diploma without being able to usher them into a professional world significantly different from that of the previous generation. Thus, education cannot be understood as an automatic guarantee of breaking the chain of poverty, but rather as an arena of struggle whose outcome is determined by the intersection of individual capacity and the surrounding social structures.

Theoretically, this study suggests the need for an approach that views education as a process of capital formation in various forms that may or may not convert into social mobility for the urban poor. Practically, these findings encourage policymakers and educators to pay closer attention to the quality of the learning experience for children from impoverished families, strengthen the bridge between school and the workforce, and develop targeted support for second-generation migrants living in densely populated settlements. Suggestions put forward include the need to develop programs that combine improving school quality in poor areas, realistic career guidance, and family empowerment to sustain a child's educational journey. Further research based on empirical data will be essential to test and enrich the conceptual framework established through this literature study.

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