

The Two-Edged Sword of Social Mobility: Why Our System Elevates Narratives, Not Capability

Adam Tugwell | 13 August 2026



Social mobility is often presented as a simple moral project: remove barriers, widen opportunity, and allow people from disadvantaged backgrounds to rise.

It is a noble ambition, and one that any fair society should pursue. Yet the way social mobility is currently understood - and operationalised - contains a structural flaw that is rarely acknowledged.

It is a two-edged sword, capable of empowering genuine talent, but equally capable of elevating individuals for their narrative value rather than their capability.

When this happens, the system not only fails the individuals it seeks to help; it also undermines trust in the very idea of social mobility itself.

At the heart of this problem lies a fundamental confusion between help and hand-up.

Help is empowering. It equips individuals with confidence, skills, and the ability to step forward on their own merit. A hand-up, by contrast, is elevating. It places individuals into positions they have not yet earned, often because their background fits a narrative that institutions find symbolically useful.

These two approaches are not merely different; they produce entirely different outcomes.

Help opens a metaphorical door. It says: you have value, you have ability, and we will remove the barriers that prevent you from showing it. A hand-up opens a literal door and pushes someone through it, often without ensuring they are ready for what lies on the other side. Help respects agency and capability. A hand-up risks creating fragility, because it confers status without building the foundation required to sustain it.

This distinction becomes dangerous when institutions begin selecting individuals who fit a hero-mould - dramatic adversity, visible difference, a compelling story - rather than those who possess genuine capability.

Hero narratives are emotionally powerful and politically convenient. They allow institutions to demonstrate progress, inspire audiences, and signal virtue. But hero narratives reward the story, not the skill.

When someone is elevated primarily because their background is narratively useful, two predictable consequences follow. First, they may struggle to perform at the level to which they have been elevated. Second, their struggle becomes a referendum on social mobility itself. Critics generalise from the individual to the group, and from the group to the entire project.

The collateral damage is severe. Exceptional talent gets left behind. Many disadvantaged individuals possess extraordinary capability precisely because of their formative experiences.

They have developed resilience, adaptability, emotional intelligence, and problem-solving skills that cannot be taught in classrooms. But because their adversity

is not dramatic enough, or because they do not perform their hardship in a way that fits the hero narrative, they are overlooked.

Meanwhile, individuals whose wounding - whether true, exaggerated, or misunderstood - is narratively compelling are elevated. Their trauma becomes their currency. Their background becomes their qualification. Their story becomes their evidence.

This dynamic is intensified by the way society has come to value education. In a wealth-centric system, financial productivity becomes the measure of human worth. Academic qualifications correlate with income, so they become the primary gateway to opportunity.

The result is an educational system weighted almost entirely toward academic achievement. The narrative that “everyone should get a degree” sounds egalitarian, but it is built on a false assumption: that academic learning is the universal route to success.

It isn't. Many people are not academic or consciously cerebral learners. They are experiential, practical, hands-on - individuals whose intelligence expresses itself through doing rather than theorising.

These young people are not less capable; they are differently capable. Yet the current system treats them as failures because it only recognises one form of intelligence.

A genuinely vocational pathway - beginning at 14 and continuing to 21 - would allow thousands of young people to thrive in ways no degree can replicate. By the time they finish, they would possess experience, maturity, and professional identity that academic pathways cannot provide.

The tragedy is that the system also fails traumatised young people who could be academic. Growing up in poverty, instability, or survival-mode environments means that adolescence is not a time for learning; it is a time for coping. These young people may have academic potential, but they cannot access it because their teenage years are spent navigating chaos rather than studying. The system punishes them for circumstances they did not choose.

All of this makes social mobility far more complicated than it needs to be. The bottleneck is not so much the lack of opportunity; it is the narrowness of the educational model and the hero-mould narrative that sits on top of it.

When society values only academic achievement and visible adversity, it elevates the wrong people and overlooks the right ones. It confuses narrative with merit, background with capability, and trauma with qualification.

Fixing this is not a matter of adding certificates or tweaking qualifications. It requires a fundamental shift in how we value people. We must stop treating wealth as the primary

marker of worth, academic credentials as the only legitimate pathway, and adversity as the currency of mobility.

We must start recognising all forms of human capability - practical, vocational, emotional, experiential, and intellectual. When we do this, the number of people genuinely being held back becomes far smaller, and far easier to support.

Social mobility should be about empowerment, not optics. It should uncover talent, not manufacture heroes. It should build capability, not confer status.

And it should recognise that human potential comes in many forms - most of which cannot be measured by degrees, narratives, or the visible markers of wealth.

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