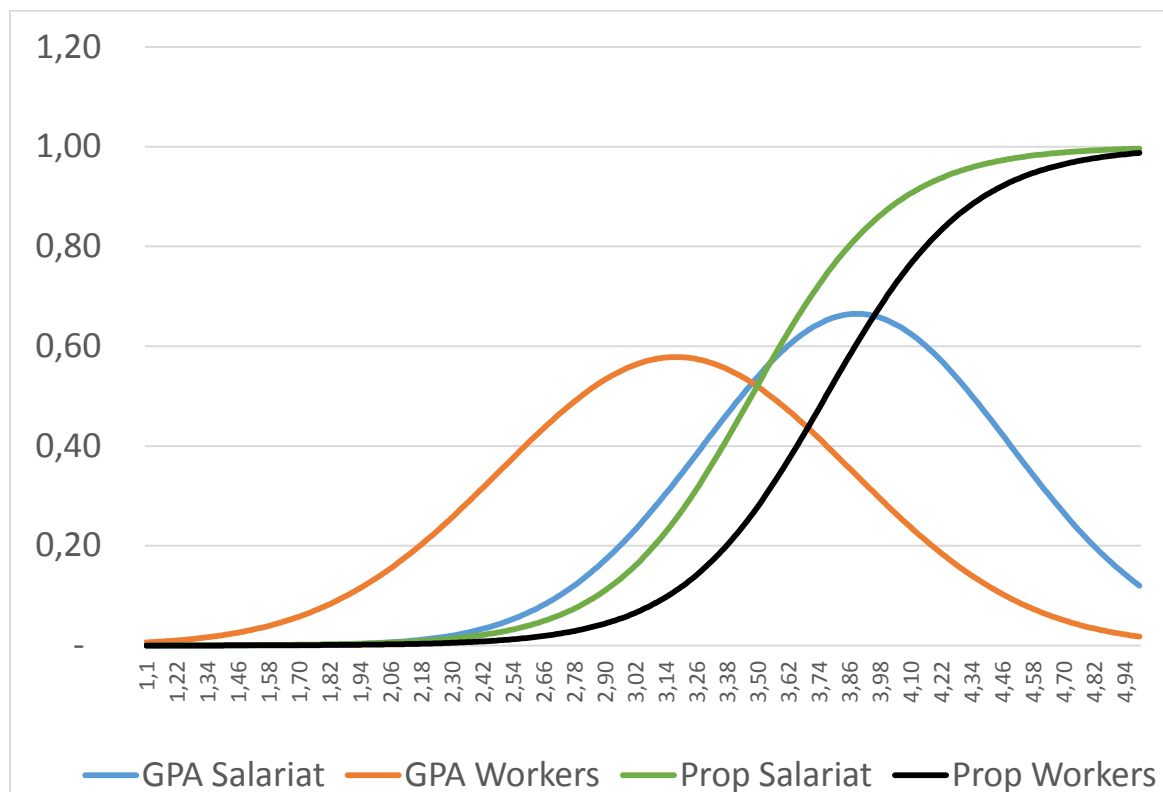


### Why do children from separate backgrounds reach different levels of education?

In studies of the association between social background and educational attainment it was early observed that children from more advantaged social backgrounds on average perform better at school and that they, even given performance, tend to choose academic tracks in school to a larger extent than children from lower social origins.

### Grade Point Average (GPA) from primary school and proportions entering upper secondary education, given grades, by social class. Girls born 1967. N=423 (S) and 1331 (W).



The figure is based on Swedish register data parents' occupations, and on children's school grades at the end of primary school and on their transitions to academic secondary school. The figure shows a typical result with the bell shaped curves indicating that grades for girls from the salariat (that is, the upper professional and managerial class) were clearly better than those for girls from the working class. The S-shaped curves indicate the proportions of girls from the two social classes entering academic upper secondary tracks in high school at different levels of grades. The outcomes for other social classes fall in between those for these two.

Differences in performance can be assumed to depend on a combined effect of nature and nurture. Thus, it is probable that children from more advantaged backgrounds from the start obtain relatively good cognitive and non-cognitive skills on the basis of the interaction between genetics and environment, an interaction operating from the conception and onwards. Parents with higher education use a more elaborated vocabulary, which probably is part of the explanation why their children on average do better on verbal tests already at age 3.

One reason that students from advantaged backgrounds more than others choose tracks that lead to higher education, seems to be that they have higher aspiration levels, related to their parents' education and social positions.

These two elements in the educational process seem important to consider in attempts to reduce social selection in education. Attempts to affect differences in performance should primarily aim to improve the ability of children at low ages, say by intervention already at the pre-school level, while attempts to reduce differences in choice may best be aimed at adolescents.

Source: Erikson, R and F. Rudolphi (2010): "Change in social selection to upper secondary school – primary and secondary effects in Sweden" *European Sociological Review*, 26: 291-305.