

Compensatory or multiplicative advantage? Parental resources, school achievement and transition to higher education in Finland

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The study background and research questions

Entrance exams and a dual model (university and polytechnic) make Finnish higher education unique compared to many other Western countries. The link between social origin and access to university has been found in numerous studies (e.g. Nori 2011), despite the free of charge educational system. The existence of polytechnics has been seen to reduce educational inequality because parental education plays no role in this transition (e.g. Kivinen et al. 2012). However, those studies have not considered student's school achievement. This study examines whether parental resources can compensate the lack of a student's academic ability or if parental resources are only beneficial for the well-performing students in the transition to higher education.

Data and methods

We use multinomial logistic regressions to study the interaction between parental resources, previous school results and transition to higher education. The data used is a 5 % population sample of individuals under the age of 25 who finished their compulsory school between years 2000-2004 (N=18,254) from Statistics of Finland. Individuals are followed annually for eight years, and the data contains information on parental education, income and SES.

Results and main conclusions

Our results show that parental education has a strong effect with child's access to higher education despite the student's school achievement. Well-performing students are likely to enter university if their parents have higher education, and to polytechnic, if their parents have primary or secondary education. Poorly performing students whose parents do not have a high-level education are not likely to enter into either level of higher education. However, polytechnics provide an entrance to higher education to the poorly performing pupils whose parents have higher education. According to our analysis, parental education is the decisive factor, not parental income or SES. Findings support the compensatory advantage hypothesis in the transition to polytechnic and the multiplicative advantage hypothesis in the transition to university.

Keywords: educational inequality, compensatory advantage, multiplicative advantage, parental resources