Underachievement: Do teachers’ and parents’ decisions conceal youth’s learning potentials?

Abstract
Underachievement has an impact on inequality of educational opportunities. The concept draws on discrepancies of attendance and attainment in German schools and individual cognitive learning potential. Empirical analyses, based on SOEP data, show that children from families of lower social background have a higher risk of underachievement. This paper examines the transition from primary to secondary schools with a focus on both teachers’ recommendations and parents’ decisions. Results show a social bias in teachers’ recommendations, even after controlling for cognitive learning potential, personality, and sex. In addition, parents of lower social background remain more often below those recommendations, which constitutes an additional impediment of their children’s educational opportunities. I discuss in particular the importance of teachers’ decision behaviour and beyond that the conceptual advantages of learning potentials compared to the traditional consideration of primary effects via school grades.

Johannes Uhlig
WZB – Social Science Research Centre Berlin
E: uhlig@wzb.eu