

**Reinforcing at the Top or Compensating at the Bottom?
Family Background and Academic Performance in Germany, Norway, and the United States**

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Abstract

Research on educational mobility examining associations between family background and children's educational performance usually fails to consider possible variations in the associations between social origin and academic performance across the distribution of performance. We argue, however, that theories of social mobility between and of resource allocation within families, do indeed predict such variations. We use quantile regression models to estimate variation in the associations between different indicators of family background (parental education, occupation, earnings, and wealth) and children's educational performance. The countries upon which we focus—Germany, Norway, and the United States—represent different kinds of welfare regimes and educational systems that may affect educational mobility. We use data from the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP), the United States' Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID), and register data from Norway. Our results indicate a stronger association between family background and academic performance at the bottom than at the middle and the weakest association at the top of the distribution. These findings are robust to employing four alternative indicators of family background. In addition, we find no systematic differences in the patterns of variation across the three countries studied. We conclude that analyzing variation in the association between family background and academic performance across the performance distribution is important for advancing our understanding of the intergenerational transmission of educational advantage.

Keywords

Cross-national comparison, education, social mobility, quantile regression, siblings