5. The role of self-regulation in understanding inequality in educational opportunity

Aim: To investigate how self-regulation moderates and mediates the effect of self-regulation across socioeconomic groups.

Theoretical background:
Achievement inequality is a pressing societal problem. Family socioeconomic status strongly affects the educational outcomes of children (Skopek & Passaretta, 2021). The opportunities to get ahead in education are unequally distributed across society, and those who are lucky enough to be born into a family with ample resources are more likely to perform well in education. While the pattern of unequal opportunities has been described by many studies, little is known about underlying mechanisms.

In this project, we will investigate the role of self-regulation. A large literature has shown that self-regulation is positively associated to learning outcomes (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2013). In this study, we will investigate to what extent there is a socioeconomic gradient in self-regulation. One possibility is that self-regulation is lower for children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Under-resourced environments may lead children to prioritize short-term rewards over long-term educational success (mediation). It could also be that even when self-regulation is similar for children from lower and higher socioeconomic backgrounds, its effects are different (moderation). This might for example play a role in educational ambitions and decisions: self-regulation might lead children from low socioeconomic backgrounds to prioritize short-term rewards over long-term educational success, whereas this is not true for children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. The key proposed mechanism here is that their parents will have fewer resources to mitigate the potential adverse learning effects of low levels of self-regulation. This is expected to be less the case for parents from high socio-economic backgrounds, as they have the means to compensate potential negative effects of self-regulation.

Research design:
This PhD project is part of GUTS, a large consortium project funded by a Gravitation grant. Part of the PhD project will be devoted to collecting longitudinal data among children as they progress into adolescence and adulthood. Together with other PhD students (based in Rotterdam, Leiden, and VU university), we will collect survey data (on socio-economic background, self-regulation, risk-taking, etc). For this reason, the PhD candidate should have active proficiency in Dutch. These cohort data will be the basis for the dissertation. Since the data collection only starts after the start of the PhD, the first paper of the PhD will be based on other data, which can include data that will be newly collected too (e.g., survey data or experimental data).

Literature:
- Schunk, D. H., & Zimmerman, B. J. (2013). Self-regulation and learning. In W. M. Reynolds, G. E. Miller, & I. B. Weiner (Eds.), Handbook of psychology: Educational psychology (pp. 45–68). John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Skopek, J.J., Passaretta, G. (2021). Socioeconomic Inequality in Children's Achievement from Infancy to Adolescence: The Case of Germany, Social Forces 100(1): 86–112

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