

Taking a detour. How flexibility in the educational system shapes educational inequality in higher education

Aim

To understand how participation in different pathways towards higher education (including detours such as track mobility or stacking) contributes to inequality in higher education.

Theoretical background

In many countries – including the Netherlands – children of highly educated parents are much more likely to also obtain a higher education degree. Most of this inequality does not originate in higher education, but in the trajectories leading towards it. During these trajectories children, parents, and sometimes also teachers make decisions on whether the child continues in education or leaves, and if it continues in what type of educational program. Crucial factors in these decisions are the perceived costs and benefits of schooling and the likelihood of successfully finishing a certain education. Early decisions may, however, be reversed later on. School systems usually have some built-in flexibility to repair misallocation of students. Examples are possibilities for upward track mobility and stacking of diplomas. Alternatively, students who are placed at a level that is too high, may experience downward track mobility, or repeat a class. As a result many students do not take the shortest route to higher education, but move from lower to higher tracks, or first finish vocational education. Whether such flexibility decreases educational inequality depends on (1) which children make use of it, and (2) how successful children are in completing the higher (or lower) levels which they reach through the flexibility option (Milesi, 2010, Triventi et al., 2020).

In this project it is studied to what extent detours in the pathways to higher education decrease or increase educational inequality and why that is the case. Can we understand this relationship by what happens at specific decision points in the educational career and characteristics of the educational system?

Research design

The PhD project is carried out at the Department of Sociology of Utrecht University in cooperation with the Dutch Inspectorate of Education. The project will use large-scale existing data on the educational careers of several cohorts of Dutch students.

Keywords: educational career, educational inequality, tracking, socioeconomic status

Literature

- Milesi, C. (2010). Do all roads lead to Rome? Effect of educational trajectories on educational transitions. *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 28: 23-44. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rssm.2009.12.002>
- Triventi, M., Skopek, J., Kulic, N., Buchholz, S., & Blossfeld, H.-P. (2020). Advantage 'finds its way': How privileged families exploit opportunities in different systems of secondary education. *Sociology*, 54(2): 237-257. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038519874984>

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