



# Nominal and positional perspectives on educational stratification in Israel



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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines whether the rising accessibility of educational qualifications attenuates the association between social origin and educational attainment. Research is divided on the question of persistence of inequality of educational opportunities (IEO). Currently most studies on this issue focus on attainment of nominal levels of education and fail to acknowledge that educational expansion is accompanied by change in the value of qualifications and in their scarcity. This study employs measures of educational attainment that capture the changing scarcity and economic value of qualifications. Data from the 1995 and 2008 censuses in Israel are used to compare the association of socioeconomic origin with educational attainment between two birth cohorts. The results show that IEO tends to persist or decline, when attainment is measured in absolute terms, but tends to increase when relative measures of qualifications or measures representing their economic value are employed. The familiarity of better off parents with the school system and their awareness of changes in the value of qualifications are offered as a central factor that explains the findings.

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## 1. Introduction

The social and economic meanings of educational categories change over time. Educational levels that were once scarce and which were obtained primarily by the most able students and by the sons and daughters of the affluent strata are now more universally available and are less selective on ability and social origins. In addition, the economic returns to intermediate and lower educational categories are declining while the relative economic advantage that is accrued to the highest levels of education is increasing. These changes are consistent with two theoretical approaches. The first considers education as a “positional good”, which is to say that its value derives from its scarcity. The low economic value of primary education, according to this approach, is due to the fact that it is so abundant. The second approach relates the growth of the relative value of higher education to the technological changes that increase the demand for skilled workers, which lead employers to offer them higher wages. According to both approaches, the value of education changes over time, with the lower levels losing the most.

Nevertheless, despite the change in the value of education most studies of educational inequality define education in nominal terms and ignore the changing social and economic significance of these nominal categories. Only recently have scholars begun to analyze the attainment process of education in relative terms (see the other contributions to this special issue). In this paper we study change in the educational attainment process in Israel during a period of rapid expansion in higher education and employ both nominal and relative definitions of education. While looking on the attainment of nominal levels of education implicitly presumes credentials have intrinsic value, the relative definition views credentials as goods whose value and social selectivity are determined by their scarcity in the population.

The distinction between nominal and positional conceptions of education has important implications for educational policy. To the extent that credentials are valuable because they represent productive skills, expanding the provision of education would increase the proportion in successive cohorts who hold said credentials and raise their earnings. However, if one adopts a Neo-Weberian perspective and views credentials as positional goods, educational expansion is akin to ascending the down escalator. From a positional perspective education is viewed solely as a mechanism of sorting and signaling and the value of credentials comes from their scarcity and the advantage they give over others who hold less prestigious degrees. According to the positional perspective,

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educational expansion cannot affect inequality between social strata in the odds of leading the educational queue.

## 2. Education in stratification

Education is a double-edged sword in the process of social stratification. On the one hand, for students of lower strata education can serve as a primary path for upward mobility. Having few other resources, they are often dependent on education as their only path to social and economic success. On the other hand, education reproduces inequality of economic and occupational opportunities from one generation to the next. This is due to the fact that students from better off families are more likely to acquire better educational achievements, which translate to better opportunities in the labor market later on. The main question, therefore, is which of the two edges is sharper. Is education more of a path to mobility or is it more of a mechanism of intergenerational reproduction? The answer has two components (Bernardi & Ballarino, 2014): the value of credentials in the labor markets, and inequality between social strata in educational opportunity. When both components are high, education is an effective mechanism of social reproduction; when the first component is high and the second is very low education is an effective avenue of social mobility and when neither components is high, education is irrelevant in the stratification process (other than possibly as a form of conspicuous consumption or as a membership card in privileged status groups).

There is ample scholarship in sociology and economics on these two components of the stratification process and on change therein over time. In most OECD countries wage differentials between workers with high and low education have increased considerably in recent decades (Atkinson, 2007; Goldin & Katz, 2009). This has been attributed to technological transformations that raise the demand for skilled and trained workers which enhances the relative economic benefit of educated workers over uneducated ones. In addition, the wages of less educated workers are depressed by competition with unskilled workers in developing countries (Rodrik, 1997). Finally, it may be due to the effects of educational expansion on the signaling value of intermediate and lower educational credentials. Signaling Theory (Spence, 1973) assumes that employers try to recruit diligent and trainable workers, and rely on their credentials as a signal for intelligence, diligence and discipline. Employers assume that applicants who had attained higher and more selective credentials are probably more capable and hard-working. As education expands lower and mid-level credentials become widespread and they may no longer represent the exceptional diligence and ability that employers seek. Thus, be it due to skill biased technological change, to globalization or the effect of educational expansion on the signals that are sent to employers, research findings consistently show that the relative economic value of lower levels of education falls overtime.

Scholars are also in agreement regarding the association between education on the one hand, and occupational attainment on the other hand. By contrast to the growing inequality in income between educational categories, the effects of education on occupational categories decline. Using data files very similar to those we analyze in the present paper Bar Haim, Blank and Shavit (2013) found that the mean SEI score of occupations attained by university and college graduates declined between 1995 and 2008 in Israel. Klein (2012) found similar results for Germany, Bernardi (2012) for Spain, and Bernardi and Ballarino (2014) who analyzed data for 23 countries find that the occupational returns to higher education declines with educational expansion.

In contrast, scholarship is divided concerning the change in the other component of the stratification process – inequality between social strata in educational opportunity. Research has shown that

inequality between social strata in economic and cultural resources is reflected in the educational opportunities of their children. Duncan, Yeung, Brooks-Gun, and Smith (1998) demonstrated that children's learning abilities are affected by the economic level of their families during early childhood. Since economic gaps are stable and even expanding over time they convert into stable or expanding gaps in educational attainments. Other factors that contribute to the reproduction of educational disparities across generations are the aspirations and motivations of children (e.g., Hauser, Tsai, & Sewell, 1983): children typically aspire to attain educational levels similar, or higher than those of their parents. Therefore, in successive cohorts, the children raised by educated parents strive to stay ahead and attain higher levels of education. This mechanism perpetuates educational inequality across cohorts (Breen & Goldthorpe, 1997). In addition, educated parents provide their children with cognitive and cultural resources that enhance scholastic success, and guide the choices that their children make as they negotiate their way through education (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). The rising homogamy among the highly educated (Esping-Andersen, 2009) intensifies these economic, motivational, cognitive and cultural processes, which in turn mediate the association between young people's social origins and their educational attainment. Scholars have argued that these processes are persistent and have shown that the statistical relationship between social origin and educational attainments is stable over time (e.g., Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993; Torche, 2005; Pfeffer, 2008).

On the other hand, other scholars hold that educational inequality between strata is weakening in some European societies (e.g. Breen, Luijkx, Mueller, & Pollak, 2009; Sullivan, Heath, & Rothson, 2011) due, presumably, to the attenuation, by economic growth and by welfare policies, of economic constraints on the educational attainment of the lower social classes (Erikson & Jonsson, 1996).

Both sides of the debate seem to agree that inequalities in educational opportunity tend to decline at the lower levels of education, namely at the primary and lower secondary levels (Breen et al., 2009; Shavit & Westerbeek, 1998; Smith & Cheung, 1986; Torche, 2005). However, whereas some scholars view this with optimism, the opposing camp argues that equalization has occurred vis-à-vis levels of schooling that had lost in economic value.

The way we view and measure education can be crucial for the conclusions we reach. Goldthorpe (2009) has argued that the association between social origins and education is likely more stable over time when the latter is measured in relative rather than in absolute terms. He offered the following research question:

"Insofar as it is relative level of education that matters in the labour market, then individuals will be under pressure to raise their educational attainment not just to acquire more human capital but further as a 'defensive' measure in order to maintain their place within the labour queue. [...] The question can also be raised of how far the finding of a weakening [effect of social origins] based on... absolute categories of educational qualification does indeed indicate a reduction in class inequalities in education, at all events as judged by returns..." (p. 18–19).

In other words, Goldthorpe suggests that when education is valued as a positional good people try to outreach their peers in the competition over the highest relative education. The fiercer the competition for educational success, the more likely it is to be affected by the resources that are available to the affluent and educated social strata. Therefore, inequality between strata in educational attainment is likely strongest vis-à-vis the most selective and scarce credentials.

Although many sociologists acknowledge the positionality of education most scholars measure credentials in absolute rather than relative terms. Several researchers used relative measures of education in studies of income or occupational inequality

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