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# Do grandparents matter? A multigenerational perspective on educational attainment in Taiwan

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## ABSTRACT

In response to the growing interest in multigenerational effects, we investigate whether grandparents' education affects grandchildren's transitions to academic high school and university in Taiwan. Drawing on social capital literature, we consider potential heterogeneity of the grandparent effect by parents' characteristics and propose that grandparents' education yields differential effects depending on parents' education. Our results show tenuous effects of grandmother's and grandfather's years of schooling, net of parents' education. However, the positive interaction effects between grandparents' and parents' years of schooling indicate that grandparents' additional years of schooling are more beneficial to students with more educated parents than for students with less educated parents. The diverging gap in the likelihood of attending academic high school or university between students with parents in higher and lower ends of the educational hierarchy, along with increased levels of grandparents' education, supports our hypothesis that grandparents' education augments educational inequality by parents' education.

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## 1. Introduction

Sociologists have long been interested in the relationship between social origin, represented by parents' status, and social destination, represented by individuals' own standing in educational, occupational, or economic hierarchies. Building on the status attainment model developed by [Blau and Duncan \(1967\)](#), numerous studies on educational attainment in a variety of societies have shown that parents' education significantly affects child's educational outcomes ([Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993](#); [Buchmann and Hannum, 2001](#)). Recently, a growing number of studies point to the limitations of the two-generation framework that constrains investigation to the parent–child relationship, and propose an alternative framework that considers the effects of grandparents and even further ancestors beyond the effects of parents in educational and social stratification processes ([Mare, 2011, 2014](#); [Pfeffer, 2014](#)). Compared to the current two-generation paradigm, a multigenerational view of inequality allows a more holistic understanding of educational attainment. While parents are adults who directly influence children's educational success, extended kin, especially grandparents, may independently affect children's education as well. Grandparents may provide help with childcare, supervision, and other emotional, social, and economic resources, all of which can be beneficial for grandchildren's educational outcomes.

However, despite the expected positive effects of grandparents on grandchildren's educational and occupational outcomes, empirical evidence of a direct effect of grandparents, net of parents, is mixed ([Chan and Boliver, 2013](#); [Erola and](#)

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Moisio, 2007; Warren and Hauser, 1997; Zeng and Xie, 2014). The ambiguity of the results suggests that it is important to extend research on this issue to other settings, especially beyond Western societies. Anticipating considerable variation in the effect of grandparents across contexts, for instance, Mare (2011) and Pfeffer (2014) called for more research on multi-generational effects across a range of societies that vary in institutional arrangements, which would help identify societal contexts in which the effects of grandparents should be strong, weak, or negligible.

In this paper, we examine multigenerational educational attainment in a non-Western setting—Taiwan. The Taiwanese case provides an opportunity to assess multigenerational effects in an interesting context of family arrangements and educational expansion (described in detail later). In particular, our study is motivated by the hypothesis that the null effect of grandparents on grandchildren's educational outcomes, found in some previous studies, might result from offsetting effects for different subgroups of the grandchildren generation. Specifically, we explore heterogeneity in the grandparent effect by investigating whether the effect of grandparents' education on grandchildren's educational attainment differs by parents' levels of education. Our focus on the interaction between parents' and grandparents' levels of education in affecting grandchildren's schooling is inspired by research that suggests possible variation of the grandparent effect under various family contexts (Jæger, 2012; Solon, 2013; Zeng and Xie, 2014). In other words, ours is an attempt to move beyond previous studies that have assumed a uniform effect of grandparents without considering parental characteristics.

Drawing on literature of social capital, we propose that grandparents' education "augments" parents' education in affecting grandchildren's educational outcomes. Our hypothesis points to the possibility that grandparents' additional years of schooling may be particularly beneficial to grandchildren whose parents have relatively high levels of education. In contrast, when parents have relatively low levels of education, grandparents' education may not have a substantial effect or may even result in an adverse effect on grandchildren's education. In other words, we anticipate that the interaction effect between grandparents' and parents' education on grandchildren's education should be positive, implying that grandparents' education augments educational gaps between children of parents with more education and children of parents with less education. These differential effects of grandparents' education on grandchildren by parents' education may offset each other so that the overall effect of grandparents as a whole can appear to be tenuous. As explained in subsequent sections, the rapid expansion of education during the past few decades in Taiwan makes the Taiwanese case particularly useful to test our augmentation hypothesis.

In the sections below, we first review existing literature on multigenerational educational attainment and highlight the lack of attention to the potentially heterogeneous effects of grandparents by parents' socioeconomic status. We then introduce literature on social capital, from which we derive our hypothesis of the augmentation effect. Next, we provide a brief introduction to the Taiwanese context, particularly focusing on the degree of educational expansion and its implications for the multigenerational effect of education. In the data and methods section, we describe our data and modelling strategies to test our hypothesis. Using a Taiwanese longitudinal data set of middle school students who were followed up to five years after middle school graduation, we assess the effects of grandparents' education on grandchildren's high school and university attendance. We compare models with and without interaction effects between grandparents' and parents' education to test whether the grandparent effect is conditioned by parents' education. Finally, we summarize our findings and point to some implications and limitations of our study.

## 2. Literature review

While grandparents' socioeconomic status may affect grandchildren's socioeconomic attainment in various ways, an important question is whether grandparents independently affect grandchildren after controlling for parents' socioeconomic status. Studies in the U.S. and Finland showed that grandparents' socioeconomic positions were not significantly associated with grandchildren's socioeconomic positions, after parents' socioeconomic positions were taken into account (Warren and Hauser, 1997; Erola and Moisio, 2007). These findings suggest that the effects of grandparents are likely present only through their impacts on parents, which in turn affect children's education. In contrast, studying class mobility across three generations in Britain, Chan and Boliver (2013) found that social class position of grandparents had a significant effect on the class position of grandchildren even after taking into account parental characteristics. Research from Sweden also showed a significant grandparent (and great-grandparent) effect on grandchildren's education and occupation, net of parents' effect (Lindahl et al., 2012; Hällsten, 2014).

However, regardless of whether they found independent effects of grandparents, both sides of researchers often assumed homogeneity in the effect of grandparents' education on grandchildren's education and failed to consider the possibility that grandparent effects may depend on parental characteristics or other factors. Investigating the effect of grandparents on grandchildren's schooling in rural China, Zeng and Xie (2014) showed that the effects of grandparents were contingent upon multigenerational coresidence. Specifically, the authors found that only coresident grandparents significantly increased grandchildren's chances of staying in school, while non-coresident and deceased grandparents did not. This finding suggests that grandparents may not uniformly affect grandchildren's education, but may differently influence grandchildren depending on family contexts.

We argue that parents' characteristics, particularly parents' levels of education, condition the effect of grandparents' education on grandchildren's educational attainment. Parents directly influence their children's education and connect grandparents with grandchildren. Therefore, depending on how parents utilize support and resources from grandparents, such

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