

Allocation and distribution

A discussion of the educational transition model, with reference to the Italian case

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Abstract

The main characteristic of education in the past century has been its expansion: a major stratification research question associated with this is whether the inequalities of educational opportunities among classes have persisted or changed (diminished) over time. The educational transition model (Mare, 1980, 1981), adopted by the majority of scholars in the field, separates the study of allocation, that is class inequality in education, from that of distribution, the amount of schooling and its expansion, using conditional logits. A consequence of the way this distinction has influenced subsequent research has been the emergence of a sharp gap between macro-level research on the expansion of education and stratification studies.

This paper proposes to re-integrate research on allocation and distribution using cumulative logits (McCullagh, 1980) to analyse the relation between class of origin and educational attainment. Such analyses provide explicit parameters for educational expansion, as well as a measure of class inequality in educational opportunities. A model for educational expansion leading to the logistic curve is sketched, and the relation between a cumulative logit analysis and the conditional logits of the educational transition model is analysed. Empirically, the Italian case is considered, where the cumulative logit analyses show diminishing class inequality of educational opportunities (IEO), contrary to most of the previous literature. These results are systematically compared with those from the educational transition model and linear regression analyses. The difference, as it turns out, lies more in the interpretation than in the actual empirical results.

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1. Introduction and motivation

The main characteristic of education in the past century has been its expansion: a major stratification research question associated with this is whether the

inequalities of educational opportunities among classes have persisted or changed (diminished) over time. In the last two decades, the educational transition model developed by Robert Mare in his seminal papers from the early 1980s (Mare, 1980, 1981) has been adopted by the majority of scholars in the field. According to Mare's analysis, the educational transition model (henceforth ETM) separates the study of *allocation*, that is class inequality in education, from that of *distribution*, which is the amount of schooling and its expansion. The ETM

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sees the educational process as a series of sequential transitions from one educational level to another, and studies the effect of independent variables such as class of origin, parental education, gender, etc. with a series of conditional logit models. In this way, the expansion of education is “controlled for”, or, put differently, eliminated from the analysis.

The first international comparative research project on this topic analysed class inequality of educational opportunities (henceforth IEO) over time in 13 countries by means of the ETM (Shavit & Blossfeld, 1993), and the results of the project were interpreted by its coordinators, and by most of the scholars in the field, as evidence of persistent class inequality of educational attainment. Thus, researchers interested in explaining this evidence started working on theoretical models able to account for this situation (Breen & Goldthorpe, 2000; Breen & Yaish, 2006; Raftery & Hout, 1993). However, further research raised doubts about the persistence of inequality for an increasing number of countries (Breen & Jonsson, 2005) and, lastly, the first results of new comparative studies reversed the common received wisdom, showing decreasing IEO in most of the countries under observation: authors of the latter study could thus conclude calling for a re-orientation in theoretical work (Breen, Luijkx, Müller, & Pollack, 2005, p. 25).

This paper takes some steps in this direction. It proposes to reintegrate distribution and allocation in the study of IEO by means of an alternative approach, taking educational titles as ordered categories and modelling educational attainment of single classes through cumulative logits (McCullagh, 1980). From a theoretical point of view the functional form of the logistic curve is consistent with sociological analyses of the determinants of schooling expansion (Collins, 1979; Meyer, Ramirez, Robinson, & Boli-Bennett, 1977). But the analyses also involve parameters measuring educational expansion, albeit not directly, thus suggesting a direction towards a re-integration of two bodies of literature that have been sharply separated since the end of the 1970s, namely the research on class IEO concentrating on allocation, and research on the world wide expansion of education focussing on distribution. As a first step towards a systematic formalization, a model leading to the logistic curve to analyse educational expansion is sketched, and the relation between cumulative logits and the ETM is analysed.

From a substantive point of view the paper asks whether IEO did change in Italy, and if so, in which direction changed. Italy is one of the countries for which Shavit and Blossfeld’s study found persistent inequality (Cobalti & Schizzerotto, 1993). This result was called

into question by re-examination of the interpretation and re-analysis of the data (Shavit & Westerbeek, 1998), but subsequent research has not really solved this puzzle. Substantively, the cumulative logit model differs from the ETM: while the latter splits the educational process into a series of transitions, the former offers a synthetic measure of the final outcomes of the educational process. According to this measure, the solution of the puzzling question is that IEO in Italy decreased. While this result may seem at odds with existing literature, actually what the cumulative logit shows is not really different from what is known from the ETM. However, interpreting the results is more immediate, and helps avoiding an interpretation bias often associated with the use of ETM, which has often been conducive towards giving more weight to elements of stability rather than those of change in the evolution of educational systems and processes. A systematic comparison between the cumulative logit estimates and those of a series of ETMs motivates these statements with reference to the Italian case.

The paper is divided in seven sections. After Section 1, Section 2 discusses the main features of the ETM, while Section 3 presents and analyses the cumulative logit model. Section 4 reports data, variables and previous results of research on IEO in Italy. Section 5 presents and discusses the cumulative logit model’s estimates, and Section 6 compares them to those obtained by ETM models estimated on both the observed frequencies and the frequencies fitted by the cumulative logit. Section 7 concludes and suggests some directions for future research.

2. The educational transition model

Mare’s major contribution is an analytical one: his seminal papers from the early 1980s (Mare, 1980, 1981) distinguish two aspects of the association between social background and educational attainment in contemporary societies. On one side, there is the number of individuals getting a given degree, making the transition from the state of lacking the degree to that of being a degree holder. On the other side, there are the different chances of getting the degree of the various social groups considered (social classes, gender, ethnicities, educational classes and so on). Mare calls the two aspects “distribution” (amount of education) and “allocation” (of people from different social groups to educational titles). Substantively, this involves separating two aspects of contemporary educational systems: “distribution” refers to the (increasing) percentage of the population obtaining schooling at all levels of the system, or educational expansion, while “allocation” refers to inequality of educational outcomes among social groups.

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