

Family background and students' performances: an international comparison using PISA data

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Investment in human capital is usually considered the better way for achieving social mobility – i.e. for weakening links between parents' and offspring socio-economic conditions – and reducing the intergenerational persistence of inequality. However empirical studies show everywhere a strong correlation between parents statuses (e.g. educational attainments, occupations, incomes) and sons' outcomes, both in terms of educational attainments and acquired skills. In this paper we will analyze such link using as proxies of students' skills their results in the most recent PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) tests, carried out in 2006 by OECD on children aged 15. Our main aim will be identifying, through micro-econometric tools, the determinants of students' performances – distinguishing variables acting at individual, family background and school levels – in order to point out the role played by the several background variables recorded in the PISA questionnaire. Further, carrying out the analysis in an international comparison perspective –several OECD countries will be covered– we will verify if cross-country differences emerge as to the role played by background factors. We will then discuss, on the one side, if these differences are consistent with the empirical results on country performances about intergenerational inequality transmission highlighted by the literature and, on the other side, if these differences could depend on specific features of national school systems.

Keywords: social mobility, intergenerational inequality, family background, education production function, PISA tests.

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