REPORT ON THE ISA RC28 ONLINE MEETING ON EDUCATIONAL INEQUALITIES

Byambasuren Dorjnyambuu[1]

INTRODUCTION

The Research Committee 28 on Social Stratification and Mobility (RC28) of the International Sociological Association (ISA) organized an online meeting (January 20–21, 2026) that was devoted to educational inequalities, positioning education as a central institutional arena in the reproduction and transformation of social stratification in contemporary societies. Bringing together scholars from Europe, North and Latin America, Asia, and Africa, the conference offered a comprehensive overview of contemporary research on how inequalities emerge, persist, and evolve across educational stages and institutional contexts.

The conference featured parallel thematic sessions addressing inequalities in student achievement, immigrant and ethno-racial disparities, educational aspirations, intergenerational inequality and family processes, vocational training and student skills, the impact of COVID-19 and natural disasters on learning, segregation and private education, early childhood and family dynamics, gender inequalities, higher education and social stratification, education policy, school and classroom segregation, and returns to education. Collectively, these sessions adopted a life-course perspective, linking early childhood conditions, school-level mechanisms, higher-education trajectories, and labor-market outcomes.

Methodologically, the conference highlighted the increasing sophistication and pluralism of contemporary stratification research. Contributions employed multilevel modeling, longitudinal growth models, decomposition techniques, interventional mediation frameworks, differential exposure models, causal

[1] *Byambasuren Dorjnyambuu* is a post-doctorate researcher at TÁRKI Social Research Institute, Budapest, Hungary, email: dorjnyambuu@tarki.hu.

inference strategies (randomized controlled trials, staggered difference-in-differences, regression-with-residuals), conjoint survey experiments, machine-learning reconstruction approaches, and multilevel meta-analyses. Several papers combined exploratory and confirmatory designs, preregistration, and robustness checks, underscoring a strong emphasis on identification, replication, and transparency. At the same time, discussions highlighted the ongoing challenge of integrating micro-level causal estimation with macro-structural explanations of stratification.

The conference was further enriched by keynote lectures from Marissa Thompson (Columbia University) and Thijs Bol (University of Amsterdam), whose work situates educational stratification within broader dynamics of wealth accumulation, institutional design, and social mobility[2].

SESSION REVIEWS

The RC28 meeting comprised multiple thematic sessions covering the full spectrum of educational stratification research, including early childhood inequalities, higher education, labor market returns, and policy interventions. This review selectively examines the sessions that most directly addressed the mechanisms of inequality production, methodological innovation, and policy relevance, while also acknowledging the broader intellectual landscape represented in the conference program.

The **Inequalities in Student Achievement** session examined how achievement gaps emerge, are measured, and persist across students' trajectories, with an emphasis on family resources, measurement strategies, and digital competencies. Junwen Wang introduced the Generalized Socioeconomic Status of Origin (GSES-O), a composite SES measure that integrates parental education, occupation, and wealth via principal component analysis and within-country percentile ranks. Using PISA 2006–2012 data (covering up to 76 societies), the study estimates SES-based achievement gaps as the difference in expected achievement between students at the 90th and 10th percentiles of the socioeconomic status (SES) distribution, averaging about 25 percentile points. Income inequality (Gini) correlates positively with these gaps, but the "Great Gatsby Curve" – the graphical representation of the negative correlation between income inequality in a society and intergenerational mobility – varies by SES operationalization.

[2] See more details on the conference program at https://www.sciencespo.fr/cris/files/RC28_program.pdf.

The key contribution was demonstrating that SES measurement is constitutive: it reshapes cross-national rankings and interpretations of educational inequality.

Markus Lörz analyzed whether social inequalities in digital competencies have intensified over time and through which mechanisms. Using International Computer and Information Literacy Study 2013–2023 data for Germany, the study found widening SES gaps in digital skills. While disparities in home digital access have slightly declined, school tracking and cultural home resources increasingly drive inequality. Results obtained with Karlson-Holm-Breen (KHB) decomposition show that school-related factors account for the largest growth in SES gaps, alongside rising contributions from cultural capital and an expanding unexplained component. The findings suggest that digital skills are becoming embedded within broader stratification processes, extending inequality beyond simple access divides.

The **Explaining Educational Inequality** session centered on methodological innovations for disentangling structural and compositional mechanisms. Fabian Kratz developed an interventional mediation framework to identify how parental education affects children's attainment through temporally ordered pathways. Using National Educational Panel Study (NEPS) data and a regression-with-residuals approach to approximate randomized interventions, the study evaluated a sequence of mediating mechanisms, including parental aspirations, parental investment, cognitive abilities, academic track, competencies, and grades, while addressing exposure-induced confounding. Academic-track choice emerges as the dominant mediator, followed by parental aspirations and investments; cognitive ability and grades play smaller roles. The study advances inequality research from descriptive decomposition toward policy-relevant causal identification.

Max Thaning introduced the Multigroup Kitagawa–Blinder–Oaxaca (mKBO) decomposition, extending traditional binary KBO to multi-category comparisons. By benchmarking each group against the sample mean rather than a reference category, mKBO decomposes disparities into endowment, coefficient, and interaction components. Applied to 2023 American Community Survey data on U.S. racial income inequality, the analysis revealed a cumulative advantage for Asian and White Americans driven by educational prevalence and returns, alongside a cumulative disadvantage for other groups. The methodological contribution lies in offering a reference-neutral, scalable framework for multi-group inequality analysis.

Jan Skopek revisited the "schooling-as-equalizer" hypothesis by contrasting compensatory input mechanisms with Matthew-effect–type unequal gains. Using NEPS Starting Cohort 1 and differential exposure models, the study

estimated the effects of schooling and aging on scientific literacy and vocabulary in early primary school. Lower-SES children benefit more from school exposure at comparable skill levels, supporting compensatory input theory; however, higher-achieving students gain more overall, and SES gaps predate schooling. Equalizing effects are domain-specific and partially offset by unequal cumulative gains, refining both theoretical and empirical understandings of school equalization.

Gonzalo Torres addressed the measurement of wealth in inequality research when portfolio data are incomplete. Conceptualizing wealth as configurations of assets and debts rather than net worth, Torres proposed a tiered machine-learning reconstruction strategy. Using Chilean survey and administrative data, the study shows that homeownership and secured debt can be reliably predicted, while idiosyncratic liabilities cannot. Nonetheless, reconstructed configurations recover stratification patterns beyond standard SES proxies. The contribution lies in reframing wealth measurement as a validated reconstruction problem, enabling scalable and theory-consistent analyses.

The **Education Policies and Educational Inequalities–Panel I** session examined how institutional reforms shape stratification through both intended and unintended channels. Davide Azzolini evaluated a randomized controlled trial (RCT) of a 4:1 matched savings program among low-income Italian students, in which participants saved small weekly amounts (up to €1,000 over four years) that were matched four-to-one and earmarked for education-related expenses (e.g., fees, transport, digital tools), alongside financial education and guidance. The intervention increased educational savings without increasing material hardship, improved digital access, promoted sports participation and academic performance, and increased on-time progression by 17%. Effects on aspirations were strongest among the families with the lowest incomes, underscoring the redistributive potential of asset-based aid.

Andrea Canales analyzed Chile's 2016 tuition-free reform using a staggered difference-in-differences (DiD) estimator. Enrolment increased among eligible middle-income students, particularly in technical institutions, while gains for the most disadvantaged were modest, and test scores did not improve. The findings suggest that removing financial barriers expands access but does not automatically strengthen academic preparedness, highlighting the need for complementary support policies.

The **Education Policies and Educational Inequalities–Panel II** session assessed whether large-scale reforms alter underlying selection mechanisms. Giovanni Greco examined whether the 1944 UK Education Act changed the genetic selectivity of secondary education using the English Longitudinal Study of Ageing data and polygenic indices. No significant compositional change in

the genetic profile of high-school completers emerged, challenging claims that institutional expansion fundamentally reshapes genetic sorting.

Marlene Rivas evaluated Chile's Preferential School Subsidy using staggered DiD with administrative panel data to investigate whether compensatory funding can improve student achievement without baseline funding equalization. Achievement gains of 0.20 to 0.40 standard deviations (SD) were observed after two years and continued to increase over time, with stronger effects in higher-capacity schools. The findings suggest compensatory funding and baseline equalization are complementary rather than substitutive mechanisms.

Bartholomew Konechni conducted a systematic review and meta-analysis of supplementary learning interventions – after-school programs, extended instruction time, summer programs, and tutoring – to assess their effectiveness in addressing learning loss. Drawing on a large, preregistered database and applying multilevel meta-analytic models, the study found positive average effects, with tutoring showing the most robust impact (≈0.20 SD unadjusted). However, substantial publication bias inflates estimates, often halving effects after correction; once adjusted, tutoring remains statistically reliable (≈0.11 SD), while others weaken. The study highlights pervasive publication bias and the need for more rigorous, transparent evaluation standards.

The **Returns to Education** session examined how educational expansion translates into economic and symbolic returns. Shireen Al Azzawi examined how post-liberalization reforms have reshaped education inequality and returns to schooling in Egypt. The presenter documented declining public education spending, deteriorating quality (high class sizes, low TIMSS scores), a persistent skills mismatch, and weak labor demand for graduates. Vocational expansion generated uneven returns, with persistent gender and wealth disparities. The study demonstrates how structural reforms can weaken education's equalizing potential.

Carolina Queiroz examined Brazil's educational expansion and school-to-work transitions (1960–2010) using Mutual Information measures of education–occupation linkage. While absolute association increased, normalized association declined, indicating reduced credential specificity amid expansion. Decomposition revealed that compositional changes (growth in education levels and occupations) drove the trends, while the "pure" structural association declined, especially for women.

The contribution lies in showing that mass education may dilute occupational matching and produce gendered stratification effects.

Alex Chow investigated how much education shapes perceived social status in the United States using a nationally representative conjoint survey experiment. Respondents evaluated hypothetical profiles varying in education

level, university, field of study, occupation, income, and ascribed traits. The findings show that education – especially level of attainment – matters as much as occupation and is second only to income in structuring perceived status, while university prestige also carries independent weight. The effects are consistent across subgroups and largely independent of other attributes. The study highlights education as a central element of symbolic status hierarchies rather than merely a pathway to material returns.

KEYNOTE SESSION

In his keynote, Thijs Bol revisited the long-debated "vocational penalty" hypothesis, which posits that vocational education yields strong early-career benefits but disadvantages later in life due to skill specificity and technological change. Using longitudinal panel data from multiple countries (Germany, England, Switzerland, Australia, South Korea, and the UK), Bol reassessed mechanisms such as occupational mobility, employer perceptions, routine task intensity, and institutional variation in apprenticeship systems. The evidence shows little support for a substantial late-career penalty; differences between vocational and general/tertiary graduates are small and inconsistent, and many mechanisms lack empirical traction. Bol concluded that "penalty" framing is overstated and largely driven by cross-sectional evidence and measurement choices, urging more precise conceptualization and mechanism-based research on vocational education.

CONCLUSION

The RC28 online meeting indicated that research on educational inequalities has reached a stage characterized by methodological rigor and theoretical refinement, while maintaining a focus on persistent structural divides. Throughout the sessions, three central insights emerged. First, inequalities are both multidimensional and cumulative: they originate early, are shaped by institutional mechanisms such as tracking, funding, and policy reform, and persist across labor market and symbolic status hierarchies.

Second, education functions as both a material resource and a status-conferring institution, with vertical distinctions (levels) and horizontal distinctions (fields, institutions) producing unique stratification dynamics. Third,

although methodological innovations improve identification and transparency, they underscore the need to link micro-level causal estimates to macro-level institutional and political-economic contexts.