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Aerts, Nathalie; Bol, Thijs; Brummelman, Eddie

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Unequal Returns to Non-Cognitive Skills: How Socioeconomic Background and School Context Shape Educational Attainment

Nathalie Aerts[1], Thijs Bol[1], and Eddie Brummelman[1]

[1]UvA, Amsterdam, Netherlands

This preregistered study presents a unique data linkage to analyze the complex interplay between students' perseverance and their socioeconomic status (SES) in determining long-term educational outcomes. We will integrate two rich and previously separated datasets. First, the OnderwijsMonitor Limburg (OML), a longitudinal study including unique survey data on the development of non-cognitive skills measured as two crucial moments: at the end of the of primary school (grade 6) and in the third year of secondary school (grade 9). Second, the Netherlands Initiative for Educational Research (NCO) which holds detailed national register data from Statistics Netherlands about students' educational trajectories, like track placement and school choice, but also background information like SES. By combining both datasets, we examine the development of perseverance and whether the returns to perseverance are different for students from various SES backgrounds. With multilevel models, we will investigate whether the positive relationship between perseverance on educational success is stronger for students from higher SES. Drawing on a functional approach, we argue that lower returns of perseverance for students from disadvantaged backgrounds is not an individual deficit, but a consequence of unequal societal structures. We will therefore test whether school type (such as categorical schools) is able to explain this SES discrepancy in returns to perseverance. By demonstrating how the institutional context determines the reward for non-cognitive skills, our findings provide insight into structural inequalities and how the education system selectively rewards non-cognitive skills. This is crucial for policy-making aimed at reducing inequality in Dutch education and beyond.

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