Children's Extracurricular Activities and Their Relation to Short- and Long-Term Inequalities in Educational and Occupational Achievement

Henriette Bering, Universität Bremen

Extracurricular activities are a commonplace element of contemporary childhoods, and findings from sociological and psychological research suggest that engagement in these activities might be related to increased cognitive skills and educational achievement. As participation tends to be socially stratified with children from high-SES families participating more frequently, socially unequal participation patterns might contribute to the reproduction of inequalities in skills and attainment, especially if these activities have not only short-term, but also long-term impacts on children's lives. This study examines the impact of extracurricular activities on achievement at the end of childhood and beyond, investigating how these activities might be related to long-term educational and occupational inequalities. It addresses the following questions: Is there an impact of participation in extracurricular activities on educational achievement during children's schooling years? Can this effect be traced to long-term educational and occupational attainment differences beyond childhood? Can we observe direct effects of extracurricular activities on later-life achievements, or are effects mediated through their impact on short-term impacts on educational achievement in youth?

While impacts of extracurricular activities on later-life achievement have mainly been studied in the national context of the United States, research in other countries has so far been sparse, limiting the generalizability of previous findings. To address this gap, this study focuses on Germany as a case where extracurricular activities are institutionally largely separated from schooling. From a theoretical perspective, the clear separation of the educational and the extracurricular sphere in Germany might lead to different impacts of participation on achievement, as some of the mechanisms suggested to explain results in the US, such as improved school attachment, may not be at work in this context, and the short-term payoffs of activities might thus be relatively small. Nevertheless, if the benefits of extracurricular activities on cognitive and noncognitive skills operate in fact universally and context-independently, these activities, in the German context, might still impact long-term outcomes.

To examine the relation between extracurricular activities and long-term educational and occupational outcomes in Germany, this study analyzes household panel data from the German Socioeconomic Panel (SOEP). Propensity score matching is used to reduce the confounding effect that socially unequal selection into extracurricular participation has on unequal outcomes, using a range of observable individual child and family background characteristics impacting selection into activities. This separates the process of controlling for selection into activities from the process of analyzing the educational and occupational outcomes. Additionally, structural equation modelling is used to estimate direct and indirect effects of extracurricular activities beyond childhood.

Overall, this study finds small positive effects of extracurricular activities during youth on educational and occupational outcomes. Comparing the two most common types of activities – music and sports – shows that music seems to be related particularly to educational achievement, while participation sports show a clearer relation to occupational outcomes, suggesting that these different activities impact children's later achievement through potentially different mechanisms. This study contributes to findings about the socially stratified impact of childhood dynamics and activities on persistent inequalities over the life course, providing insight into how activities during childhood can have a lasting impact on unequal outcomes.