

Does schooling decrease social inequality in early achievement?

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Does schooling affect social inequality in educational achievement? Earlier studies based on seasonal comparisons suggested schooling to equalize social gaps in learning, but recent replication studies gave rise to skepticism about the validity of older findings. We shed new light on the debate by estimating the causal effect of first-grade schooling on achievement inequality by socioeconomic background in Germany. Our identification approach exploits (conditionally) random variation in test dates and birth dates for children who entered first grade on the same calendar day. Compared to seasonal comparisons exploiting around 3 months of school absence during summer, our design exploits around 5–6 months variation in the dates of testing. We employ recent data from the German NEPS to test school exposure effects for a series of learning domains. Findings clearly indicate that schooling increases learning in all domains. However, we did not find any evidence that schooling effects differed by children's socioeconomic background. We conclude that, while all children benefitted from first-grade exposure, first-grade schooling had no consequences for social inequality in learning. We discuss the relevance of the approach and results for our knowledge on the role of schooling in the process of social stratification in Western societies.