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Socioeconomic Classroom Composition and Track Enrollment

This study investigates the role of socioeconomic status (SES) in shaping educational trajectories during the critical transition from lower to upper secondary education in Italy. Drawing on data from the INVALSI-SNV longitudinal dataset (2014–2019), which includes approximately one million students across two cohorts, we examine how both individual and classroom-level SES affect track enrollment at age 14, when students are sorted into academic (lyceum), technical, or vocational pathways.

Building on prior research that highlights the influence of contextual SES mechanisms—such as peer effects and classroom climate—our analysis incorporates school fixed effects to account for unobserved, time-invariant characteristics at the school level. This modeling strategy allows us to focus on within-school variation and more precisely estimate the impact of classroom socioeconomic composition on students' decisions. We also run a sorting test to identify schools that randomly assign students to classrooms within schools, which reinforces the robustness of our findings.

Results indicate that individual SES is a strong predictor of enrollment in the academic track, with higher-SES students about 8 percentage points more likely to attend lyceums. Classroom SES composition is also positively associated with academic track enrollment, suggesting that exposure to higher-SES peers within classrooms contributes to aspirations and opportunities. However, the interaction between individual SES and classroom SES appears limited, indicating that compositional advantages within classrooms do not substantially magnify the benefits of individual socioeconomic resources.

Keywords/Topics

Socioeconomic composition, peer effect, track enrollment

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