

Essays on economics of education and school choice

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Summary

Numerous econometric techniques and identification strategies have been recently developed to recovering causal effects in social sciences. Given the recent availability of administrative datasets of public use, policymakers have increased their demand for evidence-based educational interventions. Motivated by this trend, this dissertation explores several aspects of the economics of human capital acquisition, such as the role of heterogeneous parental preferences for education and their influence on final schooling choices, the impact of internal displacement inflows on educational outcomes at hosting communities, and the effects of grade retention on academic performance at the end of secondary school. Together, these *Essays on Economics of Education and School Choice*, refine existing thinking on the effect of intended and unintended interventions, at the individual and group levels, that determine educational outcomes with significant economic consequences.

In Chapter 1, a demand model for academic tracks at secondary school is implemented to assess whether parents from opposite socio-economic backgrounds value education differently. Using data from a regional secondary school system in the Netherlands, we obtain evidence of educational sorting that explains the existing “enrollment gap” between students with different upbringings but comparable prior academic performance. In Chapter 2, by using numerous administrative datasets on political competition, civil conflict outcomes, and test scores from Colombia, we implement a regression-discontinuity design to document the negative effect of internally displaced inflows on educational outcomes of students in hosting areas. Finally, Chapter 3 exploits a natural experiment on retention in the Colombian education system, to assess the effects of increased grade retention on academic achievement, in the form of high-school exit exam scores.

The findings of this thesis contribute to both the academic and policy debates by suggesting that: i) inequalities in the access to educational opportunities can undermine social and intergenerational mobility, even in those school systems that pose no barriers of entry or significant transactions costs, ii) educational policies implemented in the shadow of an internal displacement crisis can be ineffective as internal displacement effects are severe and persistent, and iii) the policy recommendation of retaining more students at the national level can be counterproductive as the net-benefits of retaining more students are non-linear, marginally decreasing, and largely heterogeneous among academic subjects, schools and students.