14. Equalising opportunities in health through educational policy

Despite the growing prominence of theoretical analysis of inequality of opportunity over the past twenty years, empirical work towards the normative evaluation of real-world policies has been minimal. This paper seeks to address this issue. It proposes a normative framework to model the influence of educational policy on health outcomes, grounded in Roemer’s model of equality of opportunity. We apply this model to the National Child Development Study (NCDS) cohort, who, since their schooling lay within the transition period of the comprehensive education reform in England and Wales, attended different types of secondary school. We use this reform in two ways: first, to evaluate the health outcomes of different educational policies under different normative principles; second, to simulate counterfactual distributions of health outcomes by neutralising the different channels through which early life circumstances influence health. Evidence on the comparative performance of the two educational systems is mixed, suggesting that the opportunity-enhancing effects of the comprehensive reform were, at best, modest in terms of adult health. For some of the health outcomes considered, this leads to a convergence between the policy recommendations made by the two ethical principles of equality of opportunity and utilitarianism, while for others, the two principles diverge in their evaluation.