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The Role of Teachers, Schools, and Culture in Education and Labor Market Outcomes

Natalie Irmert

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The Role of Teachers, Schools, and Culture in Education and Labor Market Outcomes

The Role of Teachers, Schools, and Culture in Education and Labor Market Outcomes

by Natalie Irmert



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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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Abstract This thesis consists of four self-contained papers in the economics of education and labor economics. In the first chapter, we study whether differences in teacher quality across countries are a contributor of international learning gaps. In particular, we study the effects of two dimensions of teacher quality, subject knowledge and didactic skills, on student learning in francophone Sub-Saharan Africa. Exploiting variation between subjects in a student fixed-effects model, we find that only teacher subject knowledge has a large positive effect on student achievement. Differences in teacher subject knowledge account for 37 percent of the variation in average student achievement across countries. In the second chapter, we study the impact of autonomous schools on student achievement and school segregation. Employing a triple-differences design, we find that autonomous schools do not raise overall achievement, but increase learning gaps between groups. We also find that autonomous schools increase segregation by socioeconomic and immigrant status. In the third chapter, I investigate whether occupational gender norms contribute to gendered occupational choice. I study whether second-generation immigrant men are less likely to work in an occupation that is perceived as female work in their country of origin. I find robust evidence that only men adhere to occupational gender norms: men are less likely to work in an occupation that is perceived as female work in their country of ancestry, while there is no such effect for women. The findings of this paper suggest that persistent social norms are a key factor behind the slow integration of men into female-dominated occupations. In the fourth chapter, we show that culturally transmitted individualism is an important determinant of working from home (WFH). To this end, we compare immigrants and their descendants from different cultural backgrounds residing in the same location. We find that a 10-point increase in country-of-origin individualism increases the likelihood of WFH by 3.9 percentage points and WFH hours by 1.12 per week.			
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To Mama, Papa, and Luki

Contents

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	v
Introduction	3
Teacher Quality and Cross-Country Differences in Learning in Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa	13
Autonomous Schools, Achievement, and Segregation	33
Bound by Tradition: Cultural Gender Norms and Occupational Choice	103
Individualism and Working from Home	209

Abstract

This thesis consists of four self-contained papers in the economics of education and labor economics.

In the first chapter, we study whether differences in teacher quality across countries are a contributor of international learning gaps. In particular, we study the effects of two dimensions of teacher quality, subject knowledge and didactic skills, on student learning in francophone Sub-Saharan Africa. Exploiting variation between subjects in a student fixed-effects model, we find that only teacher subject knowledge has a large positive effect on student achievement. Differences in teacher subject knowledge account for 37 percent of the variation in average student achievement across countries.

In the second chapter, we study the impact of autonomous schools on student achievement and school segregation. Employing a triple-differences design, we find that autonomous schools do not raise overall achievement, but increase learning gaps between groups. We also find that autonomous schools increase segregation by socioeconomic and immigrant status.

In the third chapter, I investigate whether occupational gender norms contribute to gendered occupational choice. I study whether second-generation immigrant men are less likely to work in an occupation that is perceived as female work in their country of origin. I find robust evidence that only men adhere to occupational gender norms: men are less likely to work in an occupation that is perceived as female work in their country of ancestry, while there is no such effect for women. The findings of this paper suggest that persistent social norms are a key factor behind the slow integration of men into female-dominated occupations.

In the fourth chapter, we show that culturally transmitted individualism is an important determinant of working from home (WFH). To this end, we compare immigrants and their descendants from different cultural backgrounds

residing in the same location. We find that a 10-point increase in country-of-origin individualism increases the likelihood of WFH by 3.9 percentage points and WFH hours by 1.12 per week.

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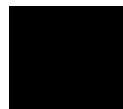
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Lund, April 2026
Natalie

Introduction



Introduction

Why do some individuals succeed in school, access better jobs, and earn higher incomes, while others do not? To what extent are these outcomes shaped by factors beyond individual ability and effort? Understanding the role of such external influences is central to explaining the origins of economic inequality. These factors can take many forms, including the institutional environment, family background, luck, and culture. A large body of empirical research shows that these dimensions play a crucial role in shaping individual decisions and economic outcomes.

This thesis consists of four self-contained papers that examine how institutional factors and culture shape economic outcomes and decision-making. It focuses on two key stages of individuals' trajectories: the formation of human capital through education and the choices individuals make in the labor market. The first part of the thesis studies how institutional features of education systems affect learning outcomes and inequality, while the second part analyzes how cultural norms influence labor market behavior.

Paper one and two focus on the role of education systems in shaping human capital formation. Education is a key determinant of long-run outcomes, including earnings, health, life satisfaction, and criminal behavior (Card; 1999; Lance; 2011), and a central driver of countries' economic growth (Hanushek and Woessmann; 2012a). However, success in education depends not only on individual ability and effort but also on features of the educational environment. The first two chapters therefore study how education systems affect student achievement and inequality in learning outcomes.

The first paper investigates the determinants of international learning gaps in low-income countries, with a particular focus on teacher quality. Using data from francophone Sub-Saharan Africa, we show that differences in teachers' subject knowledge account for a substantial share of cross-country variation in student achievement, highlighting the critical role of teacher quality for human

capital formation.

The second paper turns to education policy in high- and middle-income countries and evaluates the effects of school governance on student performance and inequality. In particular, we study the effects of introducing autonomous schools, which are schools that are publicly funded but privately managed. We find no evidence of overall improvements in student learning, but we document important distributional consequences: the expansion of autonomous schools widens achievement gaps and increases segregation between advantaged and disadvantaged students.

After completing their education, individuals enter the labor market and face important decisions regarding both *what* occupation to work in and *how* to work. These choices, too, are shaped by external factors. The third and fourth paper study how such external factors affect labor market behavior, but shift the focus from institutions to the role of social norms.

The third paper examines how occupational gender norms influence occupational choice and contribute to persistent gender segregation in the labor market. Combining observational and experimental evidence, it documents a pronounced asymmetry: men are significantly deterred from entering female-dominated occupations due to social norms, whereas women are not similarly constrained in male-dominated fields. These findings highlight the role of social norms in shaping career choices and limiting the integration of men into certain sectors.

Finally, the fourth paper studies the role of culture in shaping work behavior in the context of one of the most significant recent labor market transformations: the rise of remote work. It shows that culturally transmitted individualism is an important predictor of the propensity to work from home. This suggests that cultural traits influence not only long-standing economic behaviors but also the adoption of new work arrangements.

Taken together, the papers in this thesis demonstrate that human capital formation and labor market decisions are shaped by teachers, school governance, and culture. By providing evidence from diverse settings - ranging from education systems in Sub-Saharan Africa to labor markets in Europe and the United States - the thesis contributes to a deeper understanding of the forces that generate inequality and shape economic outcomes over the life cycle.

Summary and contributions of the thesis

This section provides detailed summaries of the chapters contained in this thesis and their respective contributions.

Paper I: Teacher Quality and Cross-Country Differences in Learning in Francophone Sub-Saharan Africa

Differences in human capital are a key driver of cross-country variation in economic performance (e.g. Schoellman; 2012; Jones; 2014; Hendricks and Schoellman; 2018), with cognitive skills playing a particularly important role in fostering economic growth (Hanushek and Woessmann; 2012a,b; Hanushek; 2013). In Sub-Saharan Africa, school enrollment rates have increased dramatically over the past decades, but learning levels in the region remain low, limiting the potential gains from educational expansion (World Bank; 2018). At the same time, there exists considerable heterogeneity in student achievement across countries within the region. Understanding the determinants of these international learning gaps is crucial for both economic and education policy, yet causal evidence on their underlying drivers remains scarce.

This paper, co-authored with Jan Bietenbeck and Mohammad H. Sepahvand, examines the role of teacher quality as a potential source of cross-country differences in student achievement in Sub-Saharan Africa. Teachers are widely regarded as the most important school-based input into learning, but internationally comparable measures of teacher quality are rarely available. Using novel data from the Programme d'Analyse des Systèmes Éducatifs de la CONFEMEN (PASEC), which assessed both student achievement and teacher competencies in 14 francophone African countries, we focus on two key dimensions of teacher quality: subject knowledge and didactic skills.

A key challenge in identifying causal determinants of cross-country learning differences is that countries and their education systems vary along many observed and unobserved dimensions, making it difficult to isolate the effect of any single factor. To address this, we exploit within-student variation across subjects by leveraging data on both reading and math from PASEC. Specifically, we relate differences in students' achievement across subjects to cross-country differences in teacher subject knowledge and didactic skills in those same subjects. This approach is equivalent to including student fixed effects, thereby controlling for all confounding factors that are constant across subjects at the student, school, and country level, while additionally accounting for subject-specific influences.

We find that cross-country differences in teacher quality predict international learning gaps. In separate regressions, a one standard deviation increase in subject knowledge raises student achievement by 0.71 standard deviations and a one standard deviation increase in didactic skills raises achievement by 0.58 standard deviations. However, when both dimensions are included jointly, only subject knowledge remains robust: a one standard deviation increase raises achievement by 0.69 standard deviations, while the effect of didactic skills is small and imprecisely estimated. These estimates imply that differences in teacher subject knowledge account for 37 percent of the cross-country variation in average student achievement.

This chapter contributes to two strands of the literature. First, it adds to the emerging body of research on the determinants of international learning gaps by providing novel evidence from low-income countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, a context that has received limited attention in prior work. Second, it contributes to the literature on teacher quality by highlighting the importance of teacher subject knowledge in explaining differences in student achievement across countries, while providing new evidence on the role of didactic skills.

Paper II: Autonomous Schools, Achievement, and Segregation

In recent decades, many countries have introduced publicly funded schools with greater operational autonomy than traditional government-run institutions. These schools, such as academies in England, charter schools in the US, and free schools in Sweden, are typically granted more autonomy over budgets, personnel, and organizational practices and are often promoted as a means to foster competition in the education sector. The expectation is that increased competition improves school productivity and raises overall student achievement. However, the expansion of autonomous schools has generated substantial debate, particularly regarding their effects on average achievement and inequality across student groups.

This paper, co-authored with Jan Bietenbeck, Linn Mattisson, and Felix Weinhardt, provides a comprehensive international assessment of the effects of autonomous schools on student outcomes. Taking a system-wide perspective, we examine both average student achievement and differences across socioeconomic groups, capturing not only the direct effects on students attending autonomous schools but also the indirect effects on students in traditional public schools. Using data from multiple waves from the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) covering over 480,000 students across countries and

years, combined with information on the prevalence of autonomous schools, the analysis links variation in school autonomy to differences in achievement and segregation across education systems.

Identifying the effects of autonomous schools across countries is challenging because education systems differ along many observed and unobserved dimensions. To address this, the chapter employs a triple-differences research design that exploits within-country variation across grades in the share of students attending autonomous schools over time. This approach allows for the inclusion of country, year, and grade fixed effects, as well as country-by-year shocks, thereby isolating the causal impact of changes in the prevalence of autonomous schools on student outcomes.

The results show little evidence that the expansion of autonomous schools improves overall student achievement. However, this average effect masks substantial heterogeneity: high-SES students benefit from an expansion of autonomous schools, while low-SES and immigrant students experience negative effects, leading to widened achievement gaps. Exploring underlying mechanisms, we find that autonomous and government-run schools do not differ systematically in observable characteristics such as resources or teaching practices. Instead, we find that autonomous schools increase segregation by socioeconomic status and immigrant background. These findings suggest that increased sorting and the resulting peer effects is a key mechanism, implying that while autonomous schools do not raise overall performance, they exacerbate inequalities by student socioeconomic groups.

This chapter contributes to the literature in two main ways. First, while much of the existing evidence focuses on either direct or indirect effects of autonomous schools, often within single countries, we provide a comprehensive international assessment of their aggregate impact on student achievement, using a research design that accounts for unobserved country-specific shocks. Second, it contributes to the limited literature on the relationship between school autonomy and segregation by providing the first causal evidence on this relationship in an international setting. Together, these findings offer new insights into how institutional features of education systems shape both efficiency and equity in student outcomes.

Paper III: Bound by Tradition: Cultural Gender Norms and Occupational Choice

Gender-based occupational segregation remains a persistent feature of labor markets worldwide (Goldin and Katz; 2016; Pan; 2015). Despite substantial

progress in gender equality, men and women continue to sort into different occupations, with particularly little change in male representation in traditionally female-dominated fields (Blau et al.; 2013). This segregation has important economic consequences, including inefficiencies in the allocation of talent, contributions to the gender pay gap, and reduced adaptability to changing labor market demands. While these implications are well documented, the underlying reasons for the persistence of occupational segregation remain less well understood.

This chapter examines whether occupation-specific gender norms contribute to gender-stereotypical occupational choices. These norms capture societal beliefs about whether certain occupations are more appropriate for men or women and may act as a barrier to entering gender-atypical fields. To study their role, the chapter combines two complementary empirical approaches. First, it introduces a novel extension of the epidemiological approach (Fernández and Fogli; 2006), comparing second-generation immigrants from different cultural backgrounds who face the same institutional environment but differ regarding the gender composition of occupations in their countries of ancestry. Second, it implements an international survey experiment that directly measures perceptions of men and women in gender-atypical occupations, including both private and second-order beliefs.

The results reveal a pronounced gender asymmetry. Men adhere strongly to occupation-specific gender norms: they are significantly less likely to work in occupations that are more female-dominated in their country of origin, with consistent evidence across survey and administrative data. In contrast, the effects for women are weaker and depend on the institutional environment, with evidence suggesting that women may counteract such norms in more gender-equal contexts. The survey experiment provides complementary evidence, showing that men entering female-dominated occupations face social perception penalties, being viewed as less aspirational and a poorer fit, whereas women in male-dominated occupations do not experience similar negative perceptions.

This chapter contributes to several strands of the literature. First, it adds to the literature on culture and economic outcomes by introducing a novel measure of occupation-specific gender norms and demonstrating their impact on occupational choice. In doing so, it also contributes to the emerging literature on masculinity norms by highlighting their role in shaping men's labor market behavior. Second, it contributes to the literature on occupational choice by providing new evidence on the importance of social norms, complementing existing explanations based on preferences, skills, and job characteristics. Finally, it contributes to the literature on the declining economic prospects of men by showing that cultural norms may hinder men's adjustment to changing labor

market opportunities, particularly in expanding female-dominated sectors.

Paper IV: Individualism and Working from Home

The rapid expansion of remote work has been one of the most profound changes in labor markets in recent years (Aksoy et al.; 2023; Özgüzel et al.; 2023). Advances in digital technologies and the COVID-19 pandemic have led to a sustained increase in working from home (WFH), which now represents a central feature of modern employment. Given its implications for productivity (e.g. Angelici and Profeta; 2024; Bloom et al.; 2015), worker well-being (e.g. Choudhury et al.; 2024; Goux and Maurin; 2025), and firms' access to talent (Bloom et al.; 2024; Hsu and Tambe; 2025), understanding the determinants of WFH adoption has become increasingly important. While existing research highlights the role of occupations and industries, substantial variation in WFH persists even among workers in similar jobs, suggesting that individual-level factors may play a key role.

This paper, co-authored with Jan Bietenbeck and Therese Nilsson, examines the role of culture - specifically individualism - in shaping individuals' propensity to work from home. Individualism captures preferences for autonomy, independence, and flexibility, which align closely with key features of remote work. To keep institutional factors influencing labor market choices constant, the analysis employs the epidemiological approach that compares immigrants and their descendants from different cultural backgrounds who live in the same economic and institutional environment. Using individual-level data from large-scale surveys in the United States and Europe, the chapter relates variation in WFH behavior to differences in country-of-origin individualism while controlling for location-specific factors.

The results show that individualism is a significant determinant of remote work. Individuals from more individualistic cultural backgrounds are more likely to work from home and spend more time doing so, with economically meaningful effect sizes. In particular, we find that a 10-point increase in country-of-origin individualism increases the likelihood of WFH by 3.9 percentage points and WFH hours by 1.12 per week. Further analyses suggest that individualism partly operates through indirect channels, including higher educational attainment and sorting into occupations that are more amenable to remote work.

This chapter contributes to two strands of the literature. First, while existing work on remote work has largely focused on its prevalence and consequences, limited evidence exists on its determinants, particularly at the individual level. This chapter provides novel evidence that cultural traits are an important driver

of WFH adoption. Second, it contributes to the broader literature on culture and economic outcomes by showing that individualism helps explain variation in one of the most significant transformations of modern labor markets. Together, these findings highlight the importance of cultural factors in labor market choices.

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