

Grade repetition and educational attainment in Brazil: Evidence from a natural experiment

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Abstract

Grade repetition is one of the most pressing problems in primary and secondary education in Brazil, with up to 30% of pupils repeating a grade contributing greatly to the age-grade mismatch in Brazilian public schools. This paper analyses the impact of grade repetition on subsequent pupil performance using a large-scale natural experiment in Brazil.

In 1997 the Brazilian Federal Government issued a law giving states the option to replace policies of repetition by the automatic promotion of students. Several Brazilian states have adopted automatic promotion policies in public schooling, allowing municipalities and/or schools to choose when to implement the policy.

This paper explores the variation created by the implementation over time of the policy in 1,500 municipalities and more than 20,000 public schools in the states of Minas Gerais and São Paulo. Using very rich data from the SIMAVE/PROEB for Minas Gerais and SARESP for São Paulo and the Brazilian Educational Census for the period from 1995 to 2006, and applying a difference-in-difference approach to the repeated-cross section data, the paper identifies the causal effect of student repetition versus automatic promotion on subsequent educational attainment. The results are important to policy makers as this paper answers the question on how automatic promotion policies impact on repetition rates, student flows and educational attainment and whether the age-grade mismatch can be reduced by such policies without the loss of quality of education.

Keywords: Grade repetition, automatic promotion, difference-in-difference, natural experiment, Brazil