Can Informational Campaigns Raise Awareness and Local Participation in Primary Education in India?

Researchers:

Abhijit Banerjee

Rukmini Banerji

Esther Duflo

Rachel Glennerster

Stuti Khemani

Sector(s): Education

Location: Jaunpur, India

Sample: Households and government schools in 280 villages

Target group: Children Primary schools Students Teachers

Outcome of interest: Student learning

Intervention type: Community monitoring Computer-assisted learning

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Partner organization(s): Pratham, World Bank

While primary school enrollment has risen sharply around the world, the quality of education remains low in many countries. Researchers examined whether increasing community oversight and participation could improve education outcomes in Uttar Pradesh, India. Mobilizing community members to monitor local schools through Village Education Committees did not increase participation in school governance or improve education outcomes, but training local volunteers to teach basic reading outside school had a positive impact on student learning.

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While primary school enrollment rates have risen sharply in much of the world, the quality of education remains low in many countries. Many children who attend school regularly are still unable to read or do basic arithmetic. For instance, a 2008 survey found that in rural India only 56 percent of children in grade 5 could read at the grade 2 level, and nearly 20 percent could not read beyond a single word. Community oversight and participation has been advocated to increase education quality. Does this strategy work, and if so how can community participation be encouraged? Is more direct action by communities to teach their children to read more effective?

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In Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous state, only 43.5 percent of children in grade 5 can read at the grade 2 level. In response to this problem, the government established Village Education Committees (VECs) in every village in 2001. VECs consist of the elected

head of the village government, the head teacher of the local school, and three parents who are nominated by their community. These committees are responsible for monitoring school performance, allocating school resources, and hiring additional contract teachers in the event of overcrowding.

Despite the promising aspects of this program, a survey conducted in 2005 indicated that 38 percent of VEC members did not readily identify as being part of the committee, and 25 percent did not even know they had this role. Only 3.6 percent of all VEC members knew they had the ability to request funds to hire additional teachers, which is one of the main prerogatives and responsibilities of the VEC.



Training volunteers to hold after-school reading classes improved educational outcomes. Photo: Arvind Eyunni | Pratham

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Working jointly with Pratham (a local NGO) and the World Bank, researchers designed three interventions that were randomly assigned in 280 villages in four rural blocks in Jaunpur district, eastern Uttar Pradesh, a populous and educationally struggling area in India. These interventions served to determine if more information and encouragement to use the channels available to them would cause VECs and community members to demand and receive better services. They contrasted this with direct action to improve learning outside the official channels.

Intervention 1: In 65 villages, Pratham staff started a series of conversations about education in small groups throughout the community. These conversations covered the current status of schools in the village, the quality of local schools, state mandated provisions for schools, mid-day meals, and local funds available for education. People were asked if they knew about the VEC and its membership and responsibilities. After two days of meetings in small groups, a community-wide meeting was held where

people were encouraged to discuss and ask for information about the VEC, with information gaps filled in by Pratham's field workers. VEC members also received a pamphlet on their roles and responsibilities from the Pratham staff.

Intervention 2: In addition to all the steps outlined above, communities in another 65 villages were trained and encouraged to conduct testing to see if children could read simple text and solve basic arithmetic problems. Volunteers put together a "report card" for each community, which was presented at the community-wide meeting.

Intervention 3: In addition to the above two steps, Pratham officers taught volunteers in another 65 villages a simple technique for helping children learn to read. Volunteers were encouraged to start after-school reading classes—they were invited to attend training sessions which lasted for four days, and staff returned an average of seven times to provide in-service training. The objective was to use Pratham-designed materials and local volunteers to supplement the normal curriculum and improve literacy among village children.

Comparison: 85 villages received no treatment, serving as a comparison.

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Impact on Information Gaps: The average effect of all three treatments was an increase of 7.8 percentage points in VEC members who knew they could access public funds, and a 13 percentage point increase of members who had been properly trained. Parents were also 2.9 percentage points more likely to know that a VEC existed in their community.

Impact on Engagement: Despite these improvements in awareness, there was little difference between the VECs' performance in treatment and comparison villages. The only significant difference was that 20 percent more contract teachers were hired in Intervention 2 villages (although not in Intervention 3 villages). Also, the intervention did not increase the level of engagement of parents with schools. Parents were no more likely to have visited the school or to have volunteered time or money in the treatment villages than in the comparison villages.

Impact on Reading: In 55 of the 65 Intervention 3 villages, volunteers ran more than 400 reading courses. The average child in an Intervention 3 village who could not read anything at baseline was 7.9 percent more likely to be able to read at least letters. Those who could read only letters at baseline were 3.5 percent more likely to read at least paragraphs or words, and 3.3 percent more likely to read stories if they were in an Intervention 3 village. These changes in average literacy across the village came despite the fact that only 8 percent of children, including 13 percent of those who could not recognize letters prior to the intervention, attended the classes. Provided that the effects of Intervention 3 are channeled entirely through attendance at the reading classes, comparing the endline reading levels of the comparison group with the Intervention 3 treatment effects described above reveals just how large these effects are: all children who could not read at baseline but attended classes ended up being able to read letters at endline, and 98 percent of children who could read at the word or paragraph level was able to read at the story level.

Intervention 3 was the only intervention which actually improved educational outcomes, by empowering individuals to improve teaching in their own communities. This suggests that enabling local action which does not depend upon large-group participation may be a means of directly affecting educational outcomes.

Banerjee, Abhijit, Rukmini Banerji, Esther Duflo, Rachel Glennerster, and Stuti Khemani. 2010. "Pitfalls of Participatory Programs: Evidence from a Randomized Evaluation in Education in India." American Economic Journal: Economic Policy 2(1): 1-30.