

Providing Life Skills Training and Mentoring To Reduce School Dropout Among Girls in India

Researchers:

Eric Edmonds

Benjamin Feigenberg

Jessica Leight

Sector(s): Education

J-PAL office: J-PAL South Asia

Location: India

Sample: 2,459 schoolgirls

Initiative(s): Post-Primary Education Initiative (PPE)

Target group: Children Women and girls

Outcome of interest: Dropout and graduation Self-esteem/self-efficacy Socio-emotional development Soft skills Take-up of program/social service/healthy behavior

Intervention type: Coaching and mentoring Soft skills Psychosocial support

AEA RCT registration number: AEARCTR-0001046

Data: Eric Edmonds

Partner organization(s): U.S. Department of Labor, Room to Read

Globally, 98 million girls do not have access to education, and in many settings, girls struggle to influence decision-making about their schooling. Researchers conducted a randomized evaluation to test the impact of life skills training and mentoring on dropout rates and non-cognitive skills among girls in India. They found that life skills training and mentoring led to a decline in school dropout and an increase in girls' non-cognitive skills.

Policy issue

Gender inequity in school access remains persistent around the world with more than 98 million adolescent girls out of school. At the same time, women and girls face severe limitations on their ability to exercise individual agency in important life decisions, including the pursuit of education, the choice of work, and the decision of when to marry or have children. Previous research has shown that interventions that provide material incentives such as cash, , bicycles ¹, , or uniforms, can be effective in reducing dropout. However, when it is possible for adolescent girls to exert some agency in schooling decisions, their preferences around schooling may also play a role in whether they attend school or not. Can non-material incentives, like providing school-based life skills classes and mentoring, be effective in reducing school dropout for girls?

Context of the evaluation

In Ajmer, Rajasthan, in the northwestern region of India, women face substantial gender-related disadvantages including relatively low levels of educational and professional attainment and low income. In this context, women typically encounter a broad set of limitations on their agency such as low aspirations, narrow perceptions of societal roles for women and girls, and limited decision-making power around school and employment decisions.

Room to Read (RtR) is a non-profit organization that supports girls' education through a life skills (or non-cognitive skills) training program, the Girls Education Program (GEP). GEP's core elements include conducting biweekly life skills classes in schools as well as group mentoring sessions for girls in grades 6 and 7. GEP teaches ten life skills including self-confidence, expressing and managing emotions, empathy, self-control, critical thinking, decision-making, perseverance, communication, relationship building, and creative problem solving. In addition to life skills sessions, the program also includes bi-monthly small-group mentoring sessions. RtR's social mobilizers, who are women from the local area and have completed secondary school, deliver the program in schools.

Participating households had to have at least one girl transitioning to grade 6 in the next academic year to be eligible for GEP. The majority of eligible households depended on wage employment while 22 percent depended on self-employment in agriculture. The sample was also characterized by a high level of gender inequity at baseline: at an average age of eleven, 17 percent of girls sampled were married, and about 90 percent of adult women in sample households believed that a wife should always obey her husband.



Three school girls stand with a chalkboard sign that reads "Education."

Shutterstock.com

Details of the intervention

Researchers partnered with RtR to conduct a randomized trial that evaluated the impact of the Girls Education Program on girls' non-cognitive skills (e.g. self-confidence, expressing and managing emotions, and empathy) and on the rate of female dropout from school. Of the 119 schools selected to participate in the study, 1,214 girls from sixty schools that had not previously been exposed to the program were randomly assigned to receive Room to Read's Girls Education Program, while 1,245 girls attending the remaining 59 schools were not offered the program and formed the comparison group.

GEP was implemented and evaluated in selected schools between 2016 and 2018 while eligible girls were in grade six and seven. Researchers conducted a baseline survey before students or their families were informed about the life skills education program, and conducted an endline survey two years after their participation in the GEP program. They collected data on girls' educational outcomes, primarily dropout, attendance, and test scores, as well as life skills, including planning for the future, gender attitudes, aspirations, and agency. Household surveys conducted with girls' parents or caregivers supplemented the self-reported responses from girls.

GEP continued the program after 2018, and researchers utilized administrative data records from schools that extended through the initiation of grade 9, to ascertain whether the impact of the program persisted over time. Administrative data through July 2019 was used to assess outcomes including enrollment and reported grades.

Results and policy lessons

After two years of exposure to the GEP, researchers found that girls who participated in the program were less likely to drop out of school, were more likely to progress to subsequent grade levels, and demonstrated enhanced non-cognitive skills over a range of dimensions linked to agency, social support, and goal-setting.

Program take-up: Of the girls offered GEP, 96 percent attended at least one life skills class, and 85 percent of girls remained engaged through grade 7.

Enrollment and grade progression: Following two full years of the program, girls who received the GEP were 4 percentage points less likely to have dropped out of school after grade 7 from a base of 13.2 percent (equivalent to a 31 percent decrease in dropout). Girls were also 4 percentage points more likely to progress to grade 7, suggesting that girls who were offered access to the GEP program in grade 6 remained with their same cohort as they progressed through school. This impact was persistent through grades 8 and 9, despite the fact that grade 9, the transition grade into high school, was a frequent dropout point for girls.

In addition, the reduction in dropout was concentrated among girls with a high probability of dropping out, suggesting that GEP may have been most impactful for girls that were particularly vulnerable.

Researchers suggested that the reduction in dropout rates could reflect the growth in socio-emotional support girls received in school. There was a 14 percent decrease in girls' stated preferences for being alone, time spent socializing outside school increased by 7 percent, and girls' reports that they have a place to stay if needed increased by 4 percent. Girls engaged in life skills classes formed closer relationships with their female classmates, and these stronger friendships raised the girls' expectations about the benefits of spending time in school given that they would also benefit from their friends' company.

Attendance and test scores: GEP did not affect attendance of those enrolled in school, nor did it lead to an improvement in test scores. Researchers posit that the increase in girls' social support structures may also explain the lack of effect on attendance or test scores. For example, an increase in social support may have made it easier to miss school, as friends could help them to catch up on any missed assignments or notes, thus offsetting any increased inclination to attend. Similarly, additional social engagement in school may have undone any gains in academic performance that might have resulted from an increase in motivation because of heightened social interactions in the classroom.

Life skills: Girls offered the program showed improvements across several life skills. Specifically, they showed enhanced outcomes on an index of future planning corresponding to a 0.7 standard deviations improvement, and expressed more positive gender norms corresponding to an improvement of 0.9 standard deviations, with those in the GEP being more likely to say that boys and girls should be treated more similarly. Girls exposed to the GEP also articulated a stronger sense of empowerment or agency. That is, they felt that they had more say in what happened in their lives. For example, girls exposed to GEP reported a 17 percent increase in the probability they felt they were the sole decision-maker about whether to attend school. These results were confirmed by parents and caregivers, suggesting that the shift in life skills was observable to adults interacting with participating girls.

However, girls did not express significantly greater education or employment aspirations, demonstrate more self-esteem, or report greater freedom of movement. Participating in the GEP also had a negative effect on girls' marriage expectations, leading them to adjust their desired age of marriage downwards to 18 years, in line with the curriculum's emphasis on 18 as the appropriate and legal minimum age of marriage.

Overall, the results suggest that life skills training can reduce dropout rates among adolescent girls and help them to build relationships with their peers. As such, future research could focus on better understanding how social relationships can be leveraged to improve learning outcomes, like test scores.

Edmonds, Eric, Ben Feigenberg and Jessica Leight. 2021. "Advancing the Agency of Adolescent Girls." Working Paper, May 2021.

1. Muralidharan, Karthik, and Nishith Prakash. 2017. "Cycling to School: Increasing Secondary School Enrollment for Girls in India." *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 9 (3): 321-50.