The Impact of Mother Literacy and Participation Programs on Child Learning in India

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Location: Indian states of Bihar and Rajasthan

Sample: Around 9,000 households in 480 villages

Timeline: 2010 to 2012

Partners: International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3ie) Pratham

Policy Issue: There is a growing body of evidence which suggests that parents’ education, particularly mothers’ education, significantly impacts children’s academic performance. Observationally, more educated parents tend to be more involved in their child’s education, have higher expectations, allocate more resources to education, and have more educational materials at home, all of which could potentially support a child’s learning. But what happens in places like rural India, where most mothers have few, if any, years of schooling, and the majority of mothers are illiterate? Can a more beneficial home environment be cultivated through a simple community-based literacy program? Can teaching mothers who have no formal education how to read or how to support their children’s education improve child learning outcomes?

Context of the Evaluation: Following the passage of the Right to Education (RTE) Act, which guarantees free and compulsory education for all children up to age fourteen, India has achieved almost universal enrollment. According to the 2011 Annual Status of Education Report (ASER), only 3.3 percent of children between 6-14 years are currently not enrolled in school. However, most children showing up for class are learning very little. In 2011, 65 percent of children in Standard III could not read a Standard I level text, and this number has actually increased 10 percentage points in the last three years. One possible remedy could be promotion of parental involvement, but this is often difficult when parents have little formal education themselves. According to ASER 2011, 46 percent of mothers of children in school have not been to school themselves.¹

Details of the Intervention: Together with Pratham, one of the largest NGOs in India, researchers evaluated whether a mothers’ literacy program could encourage parental involvement and subsequently improve children’s learning
outcomes. Mothers of first- and second-grade children who were enrolled in another Pratham program were assigned to either one of the following three treatment groups or a comparison group, which received no additional services.

1. Mothers’ Literacy Classes (ML) were held for two hours every day. The classes used Pratham’s accelerated learning techniques, which have been proven to improve children’s reading levels in just a few months (See related evaluation).

2. Child’s Home Activities and Materials Packet (CHAMP) were intended to help illiterate mothers interact with their children to enrich the learning environment at home. Children were given workbooks with a specific activity assigned for each day. Each activity included a visual description of each activity (e.g. a picture of a book for “reading,” a pen for “writing,” etc.) so that illiterate mothers could participate. Before the intervention began, the goal of the booklet was explained to each mother and they were encouraged to make their child use the workbooks to practice.

3. ML and CHAMP combined the first two interventions. However, since mothers theoretically would be learning to read at the same time, the activities component was more elaborate. Every day, the first half of class was dedicated to teaching mothers structured learning activities they could do with their children, while using the workbook as a general guide. Mothers were also trained to identify their child’s current learning level and to monitor any progress.

Both mothers and their children were tested at the start of the intervention and again one year later. This data was complemented by a detailed household survey that focused on mothers’ outcomes, children’s outcomes, and mother-child interactions.

Results and Policy Lessons: Results forthcoming.


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