Increasing enrollment and attendance by making education benefits salient and changing perceptions

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Interventions that address perception gaps about the benefits of education or make the benefits more salient can increase student participation at low cost. In contrast, increases in the quality of education can be difficult for parents to accurately perceive and thus do not necessarily lead to increases in enrollment or attendance.



A classroom in Kenya. Photo: Aude Guerrucci | J-PAL

Summary

From 2000 to 2015, the portion of primary and secondary school age children enrolled in school worldwide rose from 83 to 91 percent and 55 to 65 percent, respectively [1]. However, pockets of low enrollment remain and millions of children who are enrolled are not attending regularly. Education requires an investment of time, money, and effort with many of the benefits coming far in the future. A range of programs have been evaluated which increase the salience of the benefits of attending school.

Nearly thirty randomized evaluations shed light on the link between the perception of education's benefits and enrollment and attendance at school. Of the 30 studies, 21 studies deliberately tried to change salience, and nine studies allow us to examine whether changes in quality affected attendance. Interventions that successfully addressed perception gaps related to the benefits of education or increased student motivation or the salience of benefits had positive impacts on student enrollment and attendance. However, programs that improved the quality of education (as measured by test score improvements) did not typically increase participation, likely because parents and students find it hard to perceive changes in education quality. Even

programs that visibly increased school inputs (such as buying new textbooks or computers), which might have signaled improving education quality to parents, did not usually translate into higher attendance.

Supporting evidence

Where misperceptions about the benefits of education exist, programs that address perception gaps or make the benefits more salient can change behavior at low cost. Over 40 percent of eighth-grade boys in the Dominican Republic, did not expect their future earnings to be higher if they completed secondary school compared to only completing primary school [2], . Boys who received information on the average wages earned by people with different levels of education in their area completed an additional 0.2 years of schooling after four years. In Chile, , providing information about how to access financial aid for further education increased student attendance in the short-run and led more students to enroll in college-preparatory high schools [3], . Changing perceptions of possible career opportunities for educated women by providing information on job opportunities led parents and students to invest more in their education in India, [4], . Whether this strategy is useful locally will likely depend on existing levels of knowledge and the salience of the benefits of education. Where parents and children do not underestimate the benefits of education, or the benefits are already salient, providing information is unlikely to increase student attendance. In such cases, providing information could even reduce attendance if parents and students had overestimated the benefits of education, as was the case in China [5].

Improving education quality should increase the benefits of students and parents investing in education. However, quality is hard to perceive, so improving learning in schools does not always lead to higher participation, at least in the short term. As the quality of schooling is low in many developing countries, parents and children might conclude that sending kids to school is not worthwhile. On one hand, programs directly addressing education quality may reassure parents and children of the importance of attending school, in turn increasing participation rates. On the other hand, parents and students may find it challenging to judge the quality of education in the short term. Of nine evaluations of programs that successfully improved learning in schools (as measured by test score improvements) and also measured student attendance, four improved student participation in the short run [8], [9], [10], , while five interventions did not change participation, at least in the short run [6], [7], [8], [11]. Further study is needed to examine the longer-term impacts of improvements in education quality on student attendance.

Even when governments and others spend more money on schools in highly visible ways, such as by providing more textbooks and computers, this does not reliably prompt children to spend more time in school. A variety of programs provide school inputs, such adding textbooks or computers or improving libraries. Adding these inputs may signal to parents or students better school education quality and potentially lead to increased enrollment or attendance. However, inputs that may be perceived as making schools more attractive have not typically affected attendance. This includes programs in Kenya, [12], , Sierra Leone [13], , Peru [14], , India, [15], , and Bolivia [16].

Sector chair(s) or Academic lead(s)

Karthik Muralidharan Philip Oreopoulos

Insight author(s)

Meagan Neal

Robert Rogers

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