

Comments on the paper “Combining pre-school teacher training with parenting education: A Cluster-randomized controlled trial” by Berk Özler et al.

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Importance of the paper

- I found the paper interesting and technically strong.
 - It look at an important intervention (ECD)
 - It investigates a fundamental question in policy: what is the interaction between institutions affected by a policy and the families.
 - The paper goes inside the black box, and look at actions of teachers.

Main discussion

- In my mind, the main punch line of the paper is the following: the intervention was able to change teacher behavior and classroom characteristics, but no effects after 36 months on the kids.
- One hypothesis that can explain the result:
- (1) Schools inputs are substitutes with household inputs. For instance, in the first arm of the intervention (provision of materials), if households respond with less investment in these materials at home, then the policy is neutralized.
- In technical terms the effect that the authors are finding is the total derivative of the policy, which includes both the changes in the center and the response of the household.
- The authors advance in this discussion by including the third arm: materials, training and parental education.
- The results are very interesting.
 - We are in trouble: some papers indicate that interventions in inputs such as provision of textbooks will have zero effects because families can react very easily to that intervention (by reducing text books at home); these inputs are (strong) substitutes;
 - Those paper indicate that teacher quality is something that the household can not react too much. This paper shows presumably that they do.

Main discussion

- Second hypothesis that can explain the main result
- (2) Teacher only work with certain students, the ones that implies a lower cost for the teachers (e.g. “good”, no problematic students), leaving behind the other students. In this case a policy that provide training to teacher will have not much impact: the teacher still will work with the best students, and the space for gain in test scores is lower.
- I believe that this hypothesis is particularly problematic for the paper at hand.
- The paper uses the same intervened teacher to do the third arm (it is the trained teacher who provides training to the parents). If teacher favorite some students and families, that can explain the null results.
- The ideal experiment will have other people training the families. In some way, the training of the teachers can contaminate the training of the families.
- Nevertheless, a test that can approach this hypothesis: heterogeneous effects by students’ cognitive test at baseline

Other comments

- The authors stress the idea of fadeout. There is another possibility: catching-up by the control group. If the large effects of ECD are driven by going (or not) to a center, it is quite possible that the control group, even with low-trained teachers, would catch-up with the treatment.
 - I believe it is critical to estimate growth models (baseline versus follow-up) of any test that can be equated in time.
- I found interesting that the only treatment in which there were not closing of centers was treatment 4. In some way, the intervention of the family produces more support for the centers.
 - I would treat closing as an outcome variable and explore this a little further (I know, I know: you only have 199 observations....)
- On the estimation of heterogeneous effects: I would prefer that the model separate the two types of interactions (as I understood, now the estimations include at the same time the two types of interactions, height-for-age and education of caregiver).