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Nudges to Improve Parental Engagement and Gender Disparity in the Return to School During COVID-19 in Ghana

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Timeline

2020-2021

Sample Size

2,500 households and associated parents/primary caregivers and 5,000 school-aged children in the northern part of Ghana (including Northern, Savannah, North East, Upper East and Upper West Regions).

Research Implemented by IPA

Yes

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic led to unprecedented extended school closures around the globe. Equitable access to education was difficult to maintain during remote learning and likely increased inequalities in who returned to school by child gender and household backgrounds. In Ghana, researchers partnered with IPA and Movva Technologies to evaluate the impact of a text message-based behavioral change intervention focused on improving parental engagement in educational activities, and children's re-enrollment and attendance in school, as well as gender parity in education as schools reopened. On average, the text messages had no effect on changing home and school engagement between caregivers and children, but effects were highly dependent on whether the child's caregiver has ever attended formal schooling. For caregivers that attended school, the intervention promoted engagement and increases in child social-emotional development. There were no differences in effects by child age, nor by child or parent gender.

Policy Issue

Despite highly valuing education as a key route out of poverty, and having high educational aspirations for their children, parental engagement in child education is low in West Africa and low- and middle-income contexts more generally. Low engagement is usually higher among low-educated/SES parents, which may lack guidance on how to offer guidance on

learning and broader development to their children.

Engagement may be also lower for girls, resulting in gender disparities in schooling and learning. This may be due to lower perceived returns to education and higher opportunity cost for girls' education. Moreover, prevailing gender-biased social norms and aspirations dictate greater involvement of girls in housekeeping and care work,[1] which is likely to increase during school closures and as households grapple with the economic and health consequences of the pandemic.

Based on previous evidence on large economic shocks, girls are often disproportionately affected in accessing education compared to boys during these periods.[2] This disparity increases by age, with older girls at a higher risk of drop-out due to increased share of household work or the possibility of early marriage, pregnancy, and cohabitation. Evidence shows that the increased care stemming from the COVID-19 crisis is disproportionately assumed by women and girls, risking progress towards gender parity and chances of returning to school. In addition, the number of teen pregnancies in Sub Saharan Africa during this period substantially increased, including in Ghana.[3]

Low-cost interventions such as text messages that offer timely, actionable information to poor and relatively less educated parents can improve parental engagement and child educational outcomes.[4] However, the impact of such interventions in the context of a global pandemic in a rural low-literacy setting, and in the context of a global pandemic — where stressors are more acute than in non-emergency circumstances — is unknown. This evaluation provides evidence on how parent- and child-focused behavioral nudges sent to caregivers impact caregiver engagement, schooling, and attendance. It also examines child learning and social-emotional development. Finally, it provides some of the first evidence on to what extent messages focused on gender parity, and with differing duration of exposure, affect these outcomes, and mechanisms for impact.

Context of the Evaluation

As schools in Ghana reopened in January 2021, educational administrators were tasked with reversing the negative impacts of the closures on students. During the closures, students from resource-poor households had experienced significantly higher learning losses than students from wealthier households.[5] In addition, girls had taken on more responsibilities at home, which limited their time spent on learning. These effects were exacerbated in rural areas such as the north where much of the population is relatively disadvantaged.[6] As such, stimulating student engagement and gender parity became a priority as in-person classes resumed.

The Parental Nudges Project (PNP) was a household-level intervention designed by Movva Technologies and the study researchers in collaboration with local NGOs to improve school-aged children's schooling outcomes during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the program, parents and other primary caregivers received text messages in simple English with behavioral nudges targeting children's learning across grades and ages for in-school and

remote learning. The messages sought to bring parents closer to their children's school life by prompting parents to engage with their children on topics such as school, future plans, and sharing how they overcame similar challenges at their age. Further, messages for some households promoted gender-equitable outcomes in education and broader development. Importantly, messages did not require an academic background for the caregivers.

The content was adapted as the Ghanaian government updated its plans for reopening schools and was aligned with the Ministry of Education's remote-learning, back-to-school, and gender equality campaigns.

Details of the Intervention

Researchers partnered with IPA to evaluate the impact of the Parental Nudges Project on parental engagement in educational activities and improvements in children's learning, enrollment, attendance, and gender parity in education. The evaluation took place in households with compulsory school-aged children (ages 5-17 years) from the Northern, Savannah, North East, Upper East, and Upper West regions of northern Ghana.

Households were randomly assigned to one of five groups:

- **Standard messages:** Caregivers received messages encouraging involvement with children's learning, their child's social-emotional development, academic aspirations, and engagement in remote learning activities during the school closures and into the summer (12 weeks, into the first term of the 2021 academic year).
- **Messages with a "gender-parity boost":** Caregivers of both boys and girls received messages to parents, in which some of the nudges include content promoting girls' education and addressing some common stereotypes around gender roles during the school closures and into the summer (12 weeks).
- **Standard messages of longer duration:** Caregivers received the same standard messages as the first group but the program has a longer duration (24 weeks, into the second term of the next academic year).
- **Messages with a "gender-parity boost" of longer duration:** Caregivers of both boys and girls received messages to parents in which some of the nudges include content promoting girls' education and addressing some common stereotypes around gender roles during the school closures (24 weeks).
- **Comparison group:** No messages during the study period.

At the caregiver level, the research team measured caregivers' engagement in their child's education, child schooling, and attendance. As mechanisms, they measured caregivers' self-efficacy, stress, educational aspirations and expectations for children, as well as the prevalence of gender bias norms. At the child level, the research team measured enrollment and attendance as schools reopened, literacy and numeracy learning, social-emotional skills, and behavioral outcomes. These outcomes were measured through caregiver reports and direct assessments for children in two age groups: 5-9 years and 10-17 years.

Results and Policy Lessons

These are preliminary results; further results about caregiver engagement and child learning outcomes are forthcoming.

The text messages had no overall effects on changing home and school engagement between caregivers and children, nor on schooling outcomes. But effects were highly dependent on whether the caregiver ever attended formal schooling. There was a moderate (~.1 standard deviations) impact on average social emotional outcomes for children. There were no differences in effect between the standard program or the gender boost. There were also no differences in effects by child age, nor by child or parent gender.

Engagement outcomes by caregiver education: The text messages increased engagement of caregivers who attended school (primary, mostly) with their children at home and at school. Effects on children's social emotional skills were driven by caregivers who attended school. For caregivers with no formal schooling (two-thirds of the caregivers in the study), the text messages reduced engagement with their children at home and at school.

Self-efficacy of caregivers: Independently on the type of parents, self-efficacy reduced. For caregivers with formal education, there were increases in distress. Findings from qualitative data indicate that receiving the nudges raised a sense of caregivers' inadequacy in supporting their children's schooling. This was especially true for non-educated caregivers, as if the nudges may make their lack of formal schooling more salient. Educated caregivers often felt contrasting feelings of being motivated to support their children's schooling, which, at the same time, increased their stress levels. Participating caregivers were hesitant to believe that the researchers had their best interest at heart and felt that other programs they had experienced were short-lived with no follow through; they assumed this intervention would come and go like the others and thus had doubts about it.

Policy Lessons: Caregivers may need a base level of human capital to be able to capitalize on text messages and bring positive outcomes for their children. Without this, the messages can backfire. For parents lacking the capability to enact on the messages, the nudges may not be enough, and that additional, structured support may be needed to change child development investments. These investments include in-person meetings and community sensitivity. The results highlight that low-cost, SMS-based behavioral applications may lead to unexpected results due to the complex interaction between program implementation and local norms and capital levels, which has direct implications for the design and implementation of such programs.

Sources

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