



Parents' aspirations and commitment with education. Lessons from a randomized control trial in a shantytown

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ABSTRACT

This paper documents the impact of an after-school program called *Apoyo Escolar*, sited in one of the most vulnerable neighborhoods of a developing country, Uruguay. The outcomes of interest are academic achievement, behavior at school and grade retention. By a field experiment, we explore the interaction effects of being randomly assigned to an after-school program with an indicator of parent commitment – an unaddressed question in previous literature. We found novel results that should guide policy design. Increasing time spent in safe settings does not guarantee academic success: the after-school program is effective in improving academic performance when children have committed parents. And students' performance at school is highly correlated with parents' educational expectations. Thus, the interaction between hope, family and after-school for disadvantaged children deserves more attention in policy design.

1. Introduction

The literature on the effects of after-school programs has been growing and receiving increasing attention in recent years. There is mixed evidence concerning its impacts on students' achievements, behavior in the classroom and social skills. Some studies find that after-school children outperform those who do not attend the program (Arbreton et al., 2008; Dumais, 2009; Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Lauer et al., 2006). Other investigations show that these programs have no effect (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005; Zief, Lauver, & Maynard, 2006; Zimmer, Hamilton, & Christina, 2010), and some others find that after-school programs have negative effects (Black, Somers, Doolittle, Unterman, & Grossman, 2009; Grolnick, Farkas, Sohmer, Michaels, & Valsiner, 2007; James-Burdumy, Dynarski, & Deke, 2008). One of the reasons behind these mixed findings is that the average effect of these programs could be mixed due to heterogeneity (for instance, Berlinski & Schady, 2015, stress that the impact on child development depends critically on the quality of the program: infrastructure; elements related to health, sanitation and safety; the training and experience of educators; frequency, type and quality of the interactions between children and their educators, between children and their peers, and between educators and parents). Hence, it is important to answer questions related to the in the impact across individuals or groups of individuals. We address this puzzle studying the interaction between the afterschool program and parents' involvement. In a seminal paper, Hoover-

Dempsey and Sandler (1995) present a model suggesting that parents become involved in their children education primarily because (a) they develop a personal construction of the parental role that includes participation in their children's education, (b) they developed a positive sense of efficacy for helping their children succeed in school, and (c) they perceive opportunities or demands for involvement from children and the school. "In most circumstances, parent involvement is most accurately characterized as a powerful enabling and enhancing variable in children's educational success, rather than as either a necessary or a sufficient condition in itself for that success. It absence eliminates opportunities for the enhancement of children's education; its presence creates those opportunities" (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995, p. 319). Inspired by these suggestions, we study the influence of heterogeneity in parents' type on the performance of their children at school, by a randomized control trial, exploiting the oversubscription in an after-school program at a highly deprived neighborhood. This present study seeks to contribute to previous literature showing the second follow up of Cid (2014), two years after the intervention.

Cid (2014) showed evidence suggesting that the impact of after-school programs depends on the type of parent.

- (i) A *committed type* of parent: they are committed to their children's future well-being through education but live in a poor area because they have had bad luck or made bad decisions and have been unable to escape the slum.

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- (ii) An *uncommitted* type of parent: they typically show lack of responsibility and conscientiousness, have no great accumulation of cultural capital, have no great aspirations and are uncommitted to the education of their family – maybe the costs of becoming a committed parent are extremely high because of previous experiences. Being uncommitted is not necessarily their own fault, but usually they show this type due to their highly adverse previous circumstances.

Parents might also face pressure to conform to peer norms and it may influence their type. For instance, parents might have to choose to associate with “committed” parents and adopt their norms, or befriend “uncommitted” parents and adopt their norms to gain acceptance. The “marginal man” hypothesis was employed by Fryer, Khan, Levitt, and Spenkuch (2012). This figure is depicted as someone who lives in a bi-cultural environment and is caught between two conflicting cultures thus causing inner conflict. Hence, parents may choose whether to identify with a committed or with an uncommitted type of parent. Type is unobservable, but others can infer an individual’s type from their observable choices.

We take the number of books at home as a form of evidence of parents’ *commitment*. One may argue that all parents that have decided to send their children to an afterschool program are *committed* parents. But it is not the case in a deeply underprivileged neighborhood like the one we are studying, where public Education is free but it is provided in double shifts schools (one group of children in the morning and a different group in the afternoon). Both *committed* and *uncommitted* parents need to find where to place their children while they are working. Thus, afterschool programs have to cope with both types of parents.

We are aware that the proxy ‘*More than ten books at Home*’ is only a proxy of parent commitment with education. Though we do not rule out the possibility that other omitted factors could be influencing the parent type, previous findings show a positive association between books at home, cultural capital, and parents’ aspirations and encouragement to explore and discuss ideas (e.g., Bourdieu, 1986; De Graaf, De Graaf, & Kraaykamp, 2000; Downey, 1995; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Roscigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999; Teachman, 1987).

To study whether the impact is heterogeneous across parent types we evaluate a program initiated in a shantytown in Uruguay. Since 1997, the Education Center Los Pinos has been developing an after-school program called Apoyo Escolar in a neighborhood that shows one of the highest rates of poverty, school-dropout rates, grade retention, drug abuse and domestic violence in Uruguay. Children attend Apoyo Escolar every day after school and there they have lunch, play sports and receive homework support for five hours. The objective of the program is to improve academic achievement and behavior at school.

The findings of the present study confirm the results of the first follow up (Cid, 2014): we find that the after-school program Apoyo Escolar at Los Pinos is also effective in the second follow up, two years after the intervention, in raising children’s school performance and improving behavior for those who have committed parents.

The results of this second follow up provide new insights for policy research. The argument in favor of the correspondence between after-schooling and committed parents is not obvious. Is it a good policy to suggest that parents with a high accumulation of cultural capital or with high commitment should leave their children many hours a day in an after-school program? Wouldn’t it be better for those children to remain at home in contact with their *committed* parents? Should policy be directed to the children of *uncommitted* parents?

Another finding of the present research is the high correlation between parents’ educational aspirations and the performance of their children at school. Though we do not design an identification strategy to infer a causal relationship, the important correlation between expectations and academic achievements fosters future interventions to explore the role of parents’ aspirations on the educational attainment of children living in deprived neighborhoods.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows: section II reviews related literature, section III describes the program and explains the experiment’s design, section IV presents the econometric model and results, and section V provide the conclusions and discussion.

2. Related literature

Some decades ago, public policy discussion focused selectively on the risks present at out-of-school time or even ignored this time. More recently, there has been an increased interest in viewing out-of-school time as an opportunity for children and adolescents to develop skills and attitudes that may improve and complement achievements gained in formal education. Thus, after-school programs were created with the idea that participation in organized activities would be beneficial for the academic and social growth of young people. These “organized activities” are characterized by structured, regular and scheduled participation, adult-supervision and a focus on skill building. Mahoney, Larson, and Eccles (2005) provided an in-depth summary of the underlying theory of after-school programs. They discussed and provided foundations for the hypothesis that participating in these organized activities should facilitate the attainment of age-appropriate abilities, which in turn would allow the child or adolescent to take advantage of personal and environmental resources that promote positive functioning in the present, reduce the risk for developing problematic behavior and increase the likelihood for healthy adjustment in the future. Zief et al. (2006) and Aizer (2004) also offered some mechanisms through which after-school programs could improve outcomes for participants, changing the environment in which young people spend their after school time—for example, increasing time in safe, supervised settings; academic support; participating in enriching activities; creating more positive peer associations; and increasing parental involvement at home and school activities. Turmo, Guttersrud, Elstad, and Vegar Olsen (2009) emphasized other positive mechanisms and point to the fact that after-school programs provide pupils with more learning opportunities than the school environment. The hypothesis is that after-school schemes offer a better knowledge-basis for learning than school and home environments only—that is, attending an after-school program may translate into more time spent on homework (quantity of learning) and higher concentration on learning due to professional supervision by the after-school staff (quality of learning). Thus, after-school programs have been hypothesized to improve child behavior and educational achievements.

There is mixed evidence concerning the impact of after-schools on students’ achievements, behavior in the classroom and social skills. There are several reasons for these mixed findings, including (i) the possible inexistence of a sequenced set of activities designed to achieve the targeted skill objectives (Apsler, 2009); (ii) the limited duration of the intervention evaluated (Durlak & Weissberg, 2007; Mahoney & Zigler, 2006); (iii) the existence of negative peer associations (Zief et al., 2006) that may provide “deviance training” or may reinforce deviant attitudes and antisocial behavior (Rorie, Gottfredson, Cross, Wilson, & Connell, 2010); (iv) children may be more fatigued and act up because they are spending more time away from their households, or could be misbehaving due to programs tolerating behavior for which students would be disciplined during regular school (James-Burdumy et al., 2008); (v) the possible low degree of contact with after-school educators (Grolnick et al., 2007); (vi) the necessity of staff effectiveness in creating emotional bonds with youth participants (Gottfredson, Cross, Wilson, Rorie, & Connell, 2010); (vii) the fact that several other accepted goals of after-school programs (such as positive youth development, parent satisfaction, facilitating work, and peace of mind) were not considered adequately (Mahoney & Zigler, 2006); (viii) the “crossover” condition (also known as “contamination”) that usually refers to the inadvertent application of the treatment to the control/comparison group or the inadvertent failure to apply the treatment to people assigned to receive it (Mahoney & Zigler, 2006; Riggs &

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