Can Low-cost Interventions Close Educational Inequalities? Experimental Evidence from Nepal and the Philippines

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Abstract

Closing educational inequalities between high and low resource households remains a persistent challenge worldwide. In this study, we examine the potential of low-cost, scalable tech interventions to close educational inequality gaps. The interventions were designed to engage parents in their primary school children's education. We conducted randomized trials in the Philippines and Nepal of multiple types of tech interventions delivered via SMS message: updating parents on their children's learning levels, encouraging parental involvement through nudges, and providing access to foundational numeracy content. We find that children from households with better-educated caregivers realize larger learning gains than children in low-resource households. These results could help reconcile the literature showing low-cost SMS tech interventions have often worked in high income settings but met with more limited effectiveness in low resource settings. Since high income households have a higher endowment of educational interaction to begin with, light interventions can have a marginal effect, whereas in households with limited educational engagement to begin with, the barrier to entry to any engagement requires more substantial intervention. Rather than close educational inequalities, the types of programs tested may risk widening learning gaps if they are not tailored to low-resource environments.

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