

The Effect of a Preschool Expansion on Early Learning Outcomes in Peru

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Abstract

Can public preschool education improve early learning outcomes and narrow socioeconomic gaps in academic performance in developing countries? The paper presents quasi-experimental evidence of the national expansion of public preschools in Peru on learning outcomes. We exploit town-level and within-family variation in exposure to preschool due to the gradual expansion of preschools across Peru. We find that having access to a regular preschool improves second-grade standardized test scores for reading comprehension and mathematics by between 0.05 and 0.12 standard deviations. Exploring mechanisms, we look at two different preschool types rolled out in Peru: regular preschools and community preschools (in which local mothers deliver the service with limited supervision). The assignment of the different types of preschool is based on the number of preschool-aged students in each town, and we exploit discontinuities in this assignment rule through a regression discontinuity design. We find some evidence that being assigned to a preschool with a trained teacher and proper infrastructure has a positive impact on student learning for students in towns near the cut-off compared to those assigned to community schools. Finally, we find that despite contributions to learning, having access to preschool appears to widen rather than close socioeconomic gaps in early achievement, suggesting that complementary measures targeting the poorest students are necessary for greater educational equity.

Keywords: Education, Preschool, Peru, Inequality.

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