

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



The Covid-19 pandemic led to unprecedented extended school closures around the globe. Ghana's schools were closed from March 2020 through January 2021. Remote learning was introduced to ensure children continue learning while schools were closed. Equitable access to education is difficult to maintain during remote learning and may increase inequalities by child gender and household backgrounds. In addition to evidence of growing inequalities in remote learning, there is concern that as schools have re-opened, inequalities in which children return to school have also widened. To address this challenge, researchers partnered with IPA and Movva Technologies to evaluate the impact of a text-message-based behavioral change intervention on improving parental engagement in educational activities, parental beliefs about returns to education, as well as improvements in children's learning, enrollment, attendance and gender parity in education as schools re-opened.

Policy Issue

The effectiveness of remote learning among both girls and boys is partially based on parents' access to information and knowledge about remote learning platforms, distribution of housework among members of the family, and perceptions about girls' education. Gender disparity in schooling exists in the form of 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, which is likely to increase during school closures.

Based on previous evidence on large economic shocks, girls are often disproportionately affected in accessing education compared to boys during these periods. 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 co-habitation. Emerging 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.



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Low-cost interventions such as text-message-based timely, actionable information to poor and relatively less educated parents can improve parental engagement and child educational outcomes. However, the impact of such interventions in the context of a global pandemic in a low-resource setting, where stressors are more acute than in non-emergency circumstances, is unknown. This evaluation aims to provide evidence on how parent- and child-focused behavioral nudges focused on parental engagement impact learning, parental beliefs about returns to education, gender equity, and educational outcomes. It will provide some of the first evidence on to what extent messages focused on gender-parity, and with differing duration of exposure, affect these outcomes.

Evaluation Context

Parental involvement in children's education in Ghana is low. Engaging parents to ensure an equitable return to school and learning opportunities for children is key. Yet poor parents face informational and social barriers to support learning. Many have biased beliefs about educational investments returns, especially for girls, or about what is socially expected regarding educational engagement. Providing timely, actionable information to poor and low-educated parents, including via text-messages as a low-cost intervention, can attenuate these barriers and improve parental engagement across child-age groups and gender.

Ghana's Ministry of Education started a remote-learning program through radio, television, and internet-based platforms to continue access to learning for children during the closure of schools from March 2020 to January 2021. The need for accessible low-cost, gender-sensitive solutions to minimize disruptions in learning and ensure children return to school is especially urgent in relatively disadvantaged northern Ghana.

The Parental Nudges Project (PNP) is a household-level intervention designed by Mova Technologies and the study researchers to improve school-aged children's learning outcomes during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Through the program, parents and other primary caregivers have been receiving text messages in simple English with behavioral nudges targeting children's learning across grades and ages for in-school and remote learning. The goal of the messages is 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 promote gender-equitable outcomes in education and broader development.

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

Details of the Intervention

Researchers are partnering with IPA and Mova Technologies to evaluate the impact of the program on parental engagement in educational activities, parental beliefs about returns to education, gender equality, and improvements in children's learning, enrollment, attendance, and gender parity in education. The evaluation is taking place in households with compulsory school-aged children (ages 5-15 years) from the Northern, Savannah, North East, Upper East and Upper West Regions of Ghana.

Households are randomly assigned to one of five groups:

1. **Standard messages:** Caregivers receive 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 (3 months).
2. **Messages with a "gender-parity boost":** Caregivers of both boys and girls receive 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 (3 months).
3. **Standard messages of longer duration:** Caregivers receive the same standard messages as the first group but the program has a longer duration (6 months, into the first term of the next academic year).
4. **Messages with a "gender-parity boost" of longer duration:** Caregivers of both boys and girls receive 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 (6 months, into the first term of the next academic year).
5. **Comparison group:** No messages during the study period.

At the parent/primary caregiver level, the research team is measuring parents' engagement in their child's remote learning, parents' educational aspirations and expectations for their children, as well as the prevalence of gender bias norms. At the child level, the research team is measuring enrollment and attendance as schools re-open, learning (literacy and numeracy), time use, and behavioral outcomes. These outcomes are measured through parent reports and direct assessments for children in two age groups: 5-9 years and 10-15 years.

From November 2020 to January 2021, researchers collected baseline data on outcomes of interest and program quality. In March 2021, researchers also conducted a short survey with 2,082 caregivers to assess engagement in implementation and children's return to school.

Results and Policy Lessons

Low engagement in remote learning

Baseline data show that the informational and social barriers faced by poor parents in supporting children's remote learning were exacerbated by the pandemic. Forty percent of parents reported being less engaged in their children's schoolwork than before the pandemic. This was particularly true for younger children. Most children were engaged in educational activities for less than one hour per day and the majority were engaged in these activities alone. Thirty-five percent of 5 to 9-year-old children and 25 percent of 10 to 17-year-old children did not spend any time on educational activities while schools were closed. Parents reported spending an average of just under three hours per week supporting their children's remote schooling.

Engagement after schools re-opened

Most children—90 percent-- re-enrolled in schools once they opened. The children who did not re-enroll faced economic barriers to doing so. For example, many were working to earn money and contributing to care and domestic work. Boys in particular cited a lack of motivation and support from teachers as another reason for not re-enrolling in school. According to caregivers, most children who re-enrolled were attending school, with a slightly higher attendance rate for boys than for girls.

Gender bias in remote learning

Researchers measured gender bias and found it to be high, with parents expecting boys to achieve a higher level of education than girls. Twenty-two percent of caregivers reported that they believed their son's education was more important than their daughter's. There was an association between gender bias and the time children spent in remote learning. The children of parents who had higher educational aspirations for their daughters spent more time in remote learning.

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