

The Impact of Mentoring and Life Skills Training for Adolescent Girls: Lessons from a Randomized Evaluation in Rajasthan

In Rajasthan, India, an in-school mentoring and life-skills curriculum programme run by non-governmental organization Room to Read shows reductions in school drop-out and improvements in school progression and expression of life skills among adolescent girls.¹

This brief focuses on the evaluation by researchers Eric Edmonds (Dartmouth College), Ben Feigenberg (University of Illinois, Chicago), and Jessica Leight (American University).

Throughout the developing world, there are substantial gender differences in school attendance and performance. Even where parity in attendance exists, girls continue to be disadvantaged by the curricula, classroom dynamics, teaching methods, and responsibilities outside the classroom including work inside and outside of the home. Positive role models can also be scarce in settings with pervasive gender discrimination, and girls often face a variety of hurdles to achieving their potential.

To test whether life skills training and mentoring by older female role models can improve the progress of girls through secondary school, enhance life skills, and improve academic performance, researchers Eric Edmonds (Dartmouth College), Ben Feigenberg (University of Illinois, Chicago), and Jessica Leight (American University) partnered with Room to Read to evaluate their Girls' Education Programme in Ajmer, Rajasthan.

Key Results

- GEP reduced drop-out by 25%.
- GEP improved girls' expression of life skills, generating increases in non-cognitive indices between .05 and .1 standard deviations.
- These improvements in life skills do not seem to be associated with substantive changes in the rate of participation in child labor, along the intensive or extensive margin.
- There is also no evidence of effects on cognitive skills.

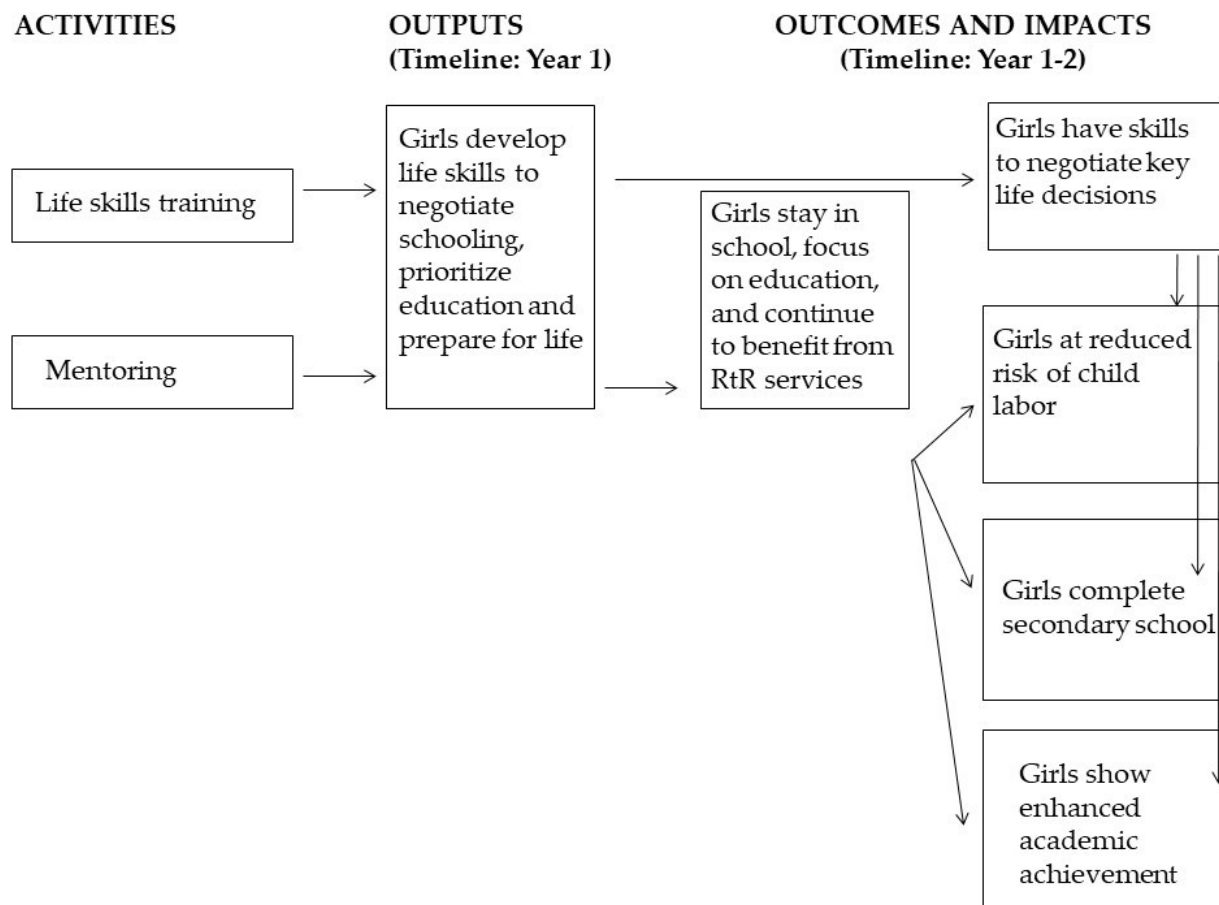
¹ Funding for this project was provided by the United States Department of Labor under cooperative agreement IL-26700-14-75-K-25. This material does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the United States Department of Labor, nor does the mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the United States Government.

Intervention: Room to Read's *Girls' Education Programme (GEP)*

Girls' Education Programme (GEP) is built around a life skills curriculum developed with attention to the skills and attitudes girls need to unlock their potential, achieve their personal and community goals, and make informed choices about their lives.

The curriculum is implemented in school by a Social Mobilizer (SM), typically a young woman from the area, who conducts activities with enrolled girls, including life skills classes, and acts as a mentor and female role model.

This evaluation focused on the two program components delivered by the social mobilizer. Every other week, the SM conducts life skills sessions with participants during part of the school day. In addition, the SM also conducts monthly mentoring sessions outside school hours. Figure 1 depicts the theory of change for the intervention.



Evaluation

From 2016-2019, researchers partnered with Room to Read to evaluate the Girls' Education Programme (GEP) in Ajmer, Rajasthan. This evaluation takes place two years into a program designed to last seven years.

A pool of 119 schools were identified as eligible² to receive the programme. The researchers categorized each eligible school as low or high quality, and then randomly selected schools from each category to either receive the programme, i.e. be in the treatment group, or to be in the comparison group. 60 schools were assigned to the treatment group. The remaining 59 schools served as the comparison group.

Outcomes and Measurement The researchers surveyed girls and their caregivers to understand the effects of GEP on the primary outcomes. Quantitative data on these outcome measures was collected at the beginning and end of the evaluation. From a sample of 2,459 girls enrolled in the study, the researchers were able to survey 2,387 girls (97.1%) at endline. Additionally, qualitative data was collected through in-depth interviews conducted in a subset of communities, with the aim of understanding the channels through which GEP changes attitudes and decision-making processes for girls, teachers, parents and other stakeholders.

² The eligibility criteria included the requirements that the schools had enrolled girls in classes 6 through 8, had between 16 and 32 girls in class 5, did not have any other NGOs providing life skills curricula to students, and had a classroom in acceptable condition in which a life skills class could take place.

Results

Girls participated in the program. Of girls enrolled in school, 90 percent of girls participated in at least one life skills session in grade 6, and 85 percent attended at least one session in grade 7.

The GEP reduced drop-out and improved grade progression. The average drop-out rate in the group receiving the GEP was 25 per cent lower than the drop-out rate of the comparison group. Girls in the GEP were also 4.3 per cent more likely to progress to the next grade. There were, however, no improvements in school attendance.

The GEP improved girls' understanding and expression of life skills. Girls in GEP reported improvements in social and emotional support, empowerment, and future planning; they also demonstrated more positive gender norms. The observed shifts correspond to an increase of around between .05 and .1 standard deviations in life skills indices relative to the control group.

There are no significant effects on child labor. The estimated effect for child labor is very close to zero with a 95 percent confidence interval ranging from a 13 percent increase to a 12 percent decrease in child labor. Findings are consistent with no substantive change in time allocation in type of work or hours spent in work, chores, studying, or academic activities outside of the classroom.

Lastly, the improvements in life skills do not seem to be associated with substantive changes in cognitive skills. The estimated effects for test scores in Hindi, mathematics and English are small in magnitude and insignificant.

Fig 2. GEP reduced drop-out and improved grade progression

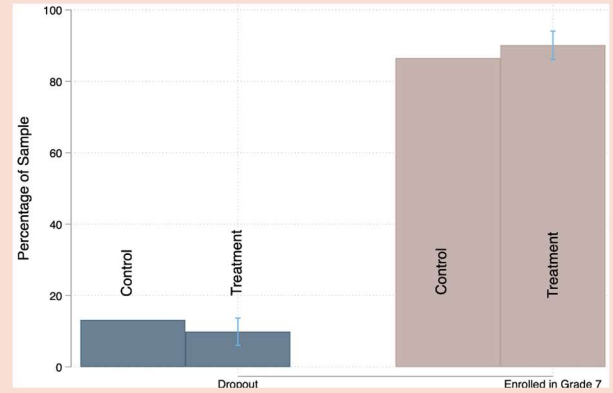
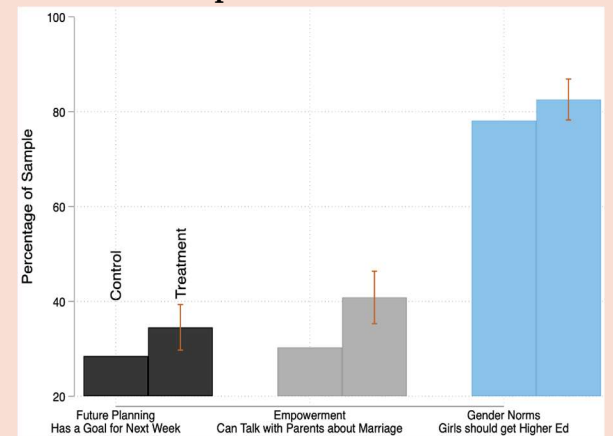


Fig 3. GEP improved girls' understanding and expression of life skills



Policy Lessons

While past research has demonstrated that financial support can be used to promote schooling and deter child labor, these tools do not resolve the fundamental disadvantage that girls face in many parts of the world. Edmonds and Shrestha (2014), for example, show that after financial incentives for schooling ended in Nepali carpet factories, girls immediately went back to weaving. Financial support only temporarily influences how children spend their time and does not change the underlying circumstances that generate child labor and school dropout in the first place. In this study, we examine whether a more permanent solution is feasible by changing norms rather than using financial incentives to overcome the expression of those norms.

The findings from this evaluation suggest that Room to Read's intervention as implemented for two years in grades six and seven was effective in increasing the number of girls who progress through school. How was this achieved? Two factors appear to be important. The program seems to be successful in building social bonds which may improve a participating girl's motivation to continue with schooling. The program also appears to be successful in enhancing their expression of life skills which may help them continue in school.

GEP's impact on life skills are of considerable importance even beyond their ability to influence schooling. A great deal of research has established the importance of non-cognitive skills on later in life outcomes (e.g. Deming 2017), and the majority of the work on the genesis of those skills has emphasized early childhood experiences (Heckman and Mosso 2014). GEP's impact on life skills highlights the plasticity of life skills in early adolescence.

GEP is designed to help girls build life skills over seven years, and this evaluation was implemented after two years. The program appears to be on-course for achieving its goals. For schooling, completion of grades six and seven is a necessary condition for finishing secondary school, and GEP helps girls stay in school. Girls seem to be expressing the life skills that the curriculum aims to teach. This evaluation does not find effects on child marriage or child labor over the period of study, and it is too early in the program to conclude whether life skills training is not enough to influence child marriage and child labor or whether these challenging societal problems take more training and work to address over a longer time horizon.

References

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