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Nationwide Bilingual Education: The Case of Peru
(Job Market Paper)

Education programs targeted towards children have been proven to have important causal consequences on the development of cognitive and non-cognitive skills and, therefore, on long-term outcomes. However, the success of these programs can be limited in cases in which a “curricula mismatch” exists between the language of instruction and the student's mother tongue. There are two typical circumstances where this mismatch occurs: first, among migrant populations that do not speak the mainstream language, and second, across minority ethnic groups that speak a local language different from the mainstream tongue which is usually that of the former colonial power. This study focuses on the latter.

I analyze the short-term effects of a nationwide bilingual education reform in Peru, for which the main purpose is to correct the instructional mismatch in schools where the majority of students belong to an indigenous community and speak a Peruvian vernacular language. The effects of this policy are ambiguous. While instruction in locally spoken language can improve communication, understanding of the curricula by the students, and their motivation to learn, limited resources available to teach effectively in local languages and changes in the selection of teachers can have detrimental consequences.

To identify the impact of the policy, I exploit the eligibility of schools and the timing of the policy. Using school information and the official list of schools classified as bilingual and targeted to be beneficiaries, I use a difference-in-difference strategy where the control group is a set of also rural non-bilingual schools. I document that in schools exposed to the reform, the probability for a director to report that BE is offered increased by 50%. My results describe large effects in the access of inputs for BE. The percentage of trained teachers and the probability of receiving workbooks increased by 70% and 500%, respectively. In turn, I find an increase of 8% in the average vernacular-language proficiency of teachers from treated schools. These findings are not trivial, given evidence of many developing countries not implementing mother-tongue language policies even when they promote them in their laws. Next, I document effects on students' outcomes. While the failure rate for students from grades 2-4 decreased by 10%, I find evidence of adverse effects on math test scores possibly driven by the sorting of good quality teachers across schools induced by the local-language certification requirement.

JEL Classification: I21, I24, I25, J15

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