Effects of Childhood Peers on Personality Skills

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ABSTRACT

- We study the effects of primary school peers on personality skills.
- Identification: classroom-level exposure to disadvantaged (left-behind) peers, aided by random classroom assignment in Chinese schools.
- 10 percentage point decrease in the proportion of disadvantaged peers → approx. 0.2 sd increase in consciousness, emotional stability, social skill
- Evidence suggests personality skills → personality skills channel

INTRODUCTION

- Established effect of childhood peers on academic achievement (short run)
- Left behind children: parents migrate away for higher income to fund basic household consumption, "making ends meet"
- In our sample, LBC are disadvantaged in pers skills
- Academic achievement doesn’t explain enough
- Some suggest personality/noncog skill but without evidence
- Known: childhood peers affect pers, acad (??) → long run outcomes
- We know there’s association
- No causal evidence
- We show: childhood peers are input \( \Rightarrow \) pers skills
- We show: peers pers. \( \Rightarrow \) own pers. (suggestive evidence)

IDENTIFICATION

- Compare across primary school classrooms
- Exposure to left-behind children (LBC) in China
- Left-behind children: parents migrate away for higher income to fund basic household consumption, "making ends meet"
- In our sample, LBC are disadvantaged in pers skills
- Concern: (1) selection bias; (2) reverse causality
- Response (1): random class assignment at grade 1, 4
- Chinese government mandate + our interviews with schools
- Response (2): (a) outcome measured in grade 4—6, peers LB status defined by grade 1 status; (b) school-cohort-wave FE; (c) migrants’ remittances not spent on children’s education
- Restrict sample to never-LB children (receiver) to remove bias from mechanical correlation (Angrist 2014)
- Extensive balance tests

ESTIMATION

- Classroom proportion of left-behind peers in 1st-semester 1st-grade and 4th-grade
- Student-level, teacher-level, parent-level controls
- Error term clustered at school-cohort level
- Data: panel of 2017, 2018 waves from 17 primary schools in Mianzhu county, Sichuan province, China.
- Survey: students, parents, teachers, including Big Five Inventory, novel social skill measure
- Administrative data: test scores, classroom assignments, teacher characteristics

BASELINE RESULTS

- 10 percentage point reduction in 4th-grade LB peers → 0.18 SD improvement in conscientiousness in grades 4—6.
- Similar effects on agreeableness, emotional stability, social skill
- No effects on test scores, IQ
- No effects from 1st-grade peers
- Not sure if fadeout, absence of effects, etc.

HETEROGENEITY

- More negative effects on those with low baseline scores
- Not much other evidence of heterogeneity
- Also considered nonlinear effects (not shown here; in the manuscript)
- More effects when LB proportion low
- A long list of robustness checks
- Effects not due to peers’ SES, other characteristics

MECHANISMS

- We have peer LB → pers
- Peer pers. → pers?
- Peer acad. → pers?
- Need peers’ pers, acad before the 4th grade
- Do not have peers’ pers before the 4th grade
- Response: show that LBC have low pers, but not low acad
- “Suggestive evidence”

CONCLUSION

- Peers in childhood → personality skill development
- Pers skill could be channels to LR effects of childhood peers
- Nature vs. nurture: another nurture win
- Consider personalities as peer effects outcomes and measures of peer quality
- Counteract negative side effects of detracking, desegregation by education programs that improve personalities (there are many; most early childhood interventions; Elango et al. 2016)