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Sample Size

366 Hogares Comunitarios de Bienestar (public community nurseries)

Research Implemented by IPA

Yes

Teaching Young Children Social Emotional Skills with the ‘Think Equal’ Curriculum in Colombia

Abstract

Evidence suggests that socio-emotional skills, such as empathy and emotional regulation, play an important role in life outcomes, but little evidence exists on the impact of teaching these skills to very young children. In Colombia, researchers are evaluating how an early childhood curriculum with a socio-emotional focus impacts children’s competencies in empathy, inclusion, compassion, problem-solving, critical thinking, collaboration, emotional regulation, generosity, and advocating and caring for others.

Policy Issue

Early childhood is one of the most important stages for development and skills acquisition. Early childhood education can improve cognitive development, foster productivity, and even reduce crime and teenage pregnancy. Most early childhood interventions integrate health, nutrition, cognitive development, and protection services.

There is, however, scarce rigorous evidence on the impact of early childhood programs focusing mainly on socio-emotional skills. A long-term study from Jamaica on the impacts of an early childhood curriculum focused on promoting stimulation through mothers showed benefits to cognitive function and language. Evidence on socio-emotional programs with older youth in Uganda and Zambia found positive impacts on the development of cognitive skills and job success. Social and emotional skills benefit both children and adults by regulating behavioral problems such as aggression and violence.

A 2015 cost-benefit analysis of a socio-emotional learning intervention suggests an economic return of US\$11 for every dollar invested in socio-emotional learning. These promising findings indicate that investments in socio-emotional skills in early childhood may be a cost-effective way for policymakers to cultivate positive social behaviors. This research will address the gaps in evidence by evaluating the effects of a socio-emotional education program for preschool age children.

Context of the Evaluation

The development of socio-emotional skills is particularly salient in Colombia given the recent end of the longest armed conflict in Latin America. The conflict has affected all Colombians directly and indirectly through exposure to violence, combat, and kidnappings in person or through media. Early childhood socio-emotional skills development in this context may support building both positive interaction and trust to promote peaceful relationships and the reduction of prejudice and discrimination. These skills play a central role in fostering functioning societies.

In response to the peacebuilding challenges facing Colombia, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) launched an intervention through its Early Childhood Development Innovation Fund to enhance the socio-emotional learning of 3 to 5-year-old Colombian children using a structured curriculum called “Think Equal.” The Think Equal program-- developed in the UK -- promotes best practice quality education, inclusion, and equality in early childhood development and has been used around the world. The implementing partner in this study, Fundación Escuela Nueva, is adapting and translating the Think Equal curriculum to the Colombian context.

In Colombia, the program will focus on the most vulnerable children. The children in the public community nurseries--or Hogares Comunitarios de Bienestar (HCBs)-- selected for the study are in some of the poorest households in Colombia, located in Sincelejo, Santa Marta, Cartagena, Monteria, among other cities. IDB is implementing this program in collaboration with the Colombian Family Welfare Institute (Instituto Colombiano de Bienestar Familiar, ICBF) which serves 1.7 million vulnerable children and their families across the country.

Details of the Intervention

Researchers will evaluate the impacts of the program on children’s competencies in empathy, inclusion, compassion, problem-solving, critical thinking, collaboration, emotional

regulation, generosity, and advocating and caring for others. Approximately 366 public community nurseries will be randomly assigned into two groups. One group will participate in the Think Equal curriculum, the other will not.

Fundación Escuela Nueva is training the childcare staff--referred to as “community mothers” - to implement the curriculum in-person and remotely over 30 weeks (three sessions of 30 minutes per week) in HCBs.

Researchers will measure impacts using surveys of parents, community mothers, and children from before and after the intervention. The initial surveys take place in February and March 2021. The follow-up surveys will take place in November and December 2021. The surveys inquire about socio-demographic information, characteristics of the HCBs, perceptions about gender and race stereotypes, teaching practices, parental investments, and socio-emotional skills. In addition, researchers will measure the prevalence of domestic violence and child discipline practices to understand whether children exposed to violence at home are more likely to benefit from learning how to manage their emotions and improve their socio-emotional skills.

Results and Policy Lessons

Results should be available in late 2022.

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