Actionable Advice to Foster Parental Engagement
Evidence from an Early-Childhood Text Messaging Experiment

Guest Lecture by Hans Fricke
Postdoctoral Researcher, Stanford University

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Abstract: Text messaging programs to overcome behavioral barriers to good parenting have been successful in improving parental engagement and children’s literacy development. These programs break down the complexities of parenting by providing a combination of general information about important literacy skills and parent-child activities, actionable advice, and encouragement and reinforcement. This present study investigates the role of actionable advice in the form of specific skill building activities as one possible mechanism of the above results. In particular, we address two interrelated questions: First, does just providing a specific activity improve parental engagement and children’s literacy development? Second, can we improve child outcomes by providing parents with more skill building activities? We find that the results on children’s literacy development depend strongly on their pre-intervention literacy skills. For children at the lowest quartile of the pre-treatment literacy assessments only providing one example of an activity decreases literacy scores by about 0.15 standard deviations compared to also providing information as well as encouragement and reinforcement. Scores of children at higher quantiles increase but only marginally significantly. We find no effects for providing additional examples of activities on test scores. Survey results suggest that only providing a specific activity decreased self-reported parental engagement by 0.23 to 0.33 standard deviations, similarly too many activities reduces engagement by 0.2 to 0.31 standard deviations.

Bio: Hans Fricke is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Stanford University Center for Education Policy Analysis and the Director of Research at CEPA Labs. He is a research fellow at the Global Labor Organization and a research affiliate the IZA Institute of Labor Economics. He received his Ph.D. in Economics and Finance from the University of St. Gallen in 2016. His research interest focus on education policy, technology in education, and causal analysis. Particularly, he is interested in determinants of student performance and major choices in higher education and the impact of technology on learning. Currently, one of his main projects focuses on how to overcome behavioral barriers to parenting with text messages.