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Mentoring, educational services, and incentives to learn: What do we know about them?

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews recent studies on the effectiveness of services and incentives offered to disadvantaged youths both in the US and abroad. We focus our analysis on three types of interventions: mentoring, educational services, and financial rewards. The objective of this article is threefold. First, we explain alternative theoretical points of view in favor (or against—when applicable) each of these interventions. We then discuss how recent empirical work has affected that view and summarize the latest findings. We conclude by considering which questions remain to be examined. Our hope is that this article will serve as a resource for those seeking to understand which educational interventions work and for whom, and to be used as a starting point for the debate on where to go next.

1. Introduction

Policies aiming at improving high-school graduation and post-secondary education enrollment have recently received renewed attention from policy makers, practitioners and researchers in response to the observed increasing earnings differential between the most and least educated workers since the late 1970s. As a consequence, there has been a new wave of interventions whose main objective is to improve the school performance of disadvantaged youths. Most of these interventions involve one or the combination of the following services: a mentoring component, an educational component, and a financial incentive component. Reviewing the theoretical motivation and the empirical evidence of these three interventions is the main focus of this paper.

The objective of this article is threefold. First, we explain the alternative theoretical points of view in favor (or against—when applicable) of each of these interventions. We then discuss how recent empirical work has affected that view and summarize the latest findings. We conclude by considering which questions remain to be examined. The paper also presents the evidence on gender differential effects.

The paper focuses on recent studies that use either experimental design or quasi-experimental design approaches, and excludes those studies that do not provide a control group (or a rigorous comparison group). Most of the review is narrowed to recently conducted studies, that is, within the last decade, to reduce the overlap with the extended literature on the effectiveness of interventions aimed at youths. The review includes studies from the US and abroad. The main studies are summarized in Table 1 at the end the paper. Three main findings arise. First, rigorous

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Table 1
Summary table.

Paper and authors	Mentoring	Educational services	Financial services	Findings	Heterogeneity
Study of Mentoring in the Learning Environment (Karcher, 2008)	X			Positive effects on non-cognitive skills, but no effects on academic outcomes	
Big Brother/Big Sister (Grossman & Rhodes, 2002; Herrera et al., 2007)	X			Positive effects on academic outcomes	By intensity of the program
Across Ages Mentoring Program (Aseltine et al., 2000; Taylor et al., 1999)	X			Lower levels of student substance use and problem behaviors, and stronger attachment of students to school and their families	
The Quantum Opportunity Program (Rodríguez-Planas, forthcoming)	X	X	X	Positive effects on academic outcomes on average. Detrimental effects on criminal activity among males at age 25	By gender: it works better for females
Student Mentoring Program (Bernstein et al., 2009)	X			No effects on average	By gender: negative effects on non-cognitive skills for boys. Positive academic performance for girls
Basic Literacy and Numeracy Skills in India (Banerjee et al., 2007)		X		Increased average test scores of all children in the treatment schools	Mostly due to large gains experienced by children at the bottom of the test-score distribution
Computer-assisted Math Training in India (Banerjee et al., 2007)		X		Increased math test scores	
Middle-school Educational Services (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002)		X		Keep students in school longer, or even accelerate their progress in school. But no effects on attendance or academic performance	Work best when combined with mentoring
High-school Educational Services (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002)		X		Unsuccessful at lowering dropout rates—despite increasing the ratio of high-school diplomas to GED certificates	Work best when combined with mentoring
Excellence in Cities (EiC) Program (Machin et al., 2004)		X		Small but positive improvement in pupil attainment and strong reduction in absences	
Lavy and Schlosser (2005)		X		It increased the probability of earning a matriculation certificate, but had no effects on achievement (although they did find that program participants gained on average two additional credits without lowering their average score)	
Bettinger and Long (2009)		X		Kept students in post-secondary education longer, and increased transfers to a higher-level college and to complete a bachelor's degree	
Scrivener et al. (2008)		X		Treated students attempted and passed more courses and earned more credits during their first semester	
Angrist et al. (2009)	X	X	X	No effects of educational services when implemented alone. However, long-lasting beneficial effects on academic achievement for women when the educational services were combined both with mentoring and financial awards based on grades	By gender: it works for females (not for males)
Kremer et al. (2008)			X	Substantial gains in academic exam scores, and teacher attendance also improved significantly in program schools	Only targeted to girls (not boys)
Angrist and Lavy (2009)			X	Substantial increase in certification rates for girls with high predicted Bagrut rates relative to other girls in the sample, that is, girls with a relatively high ex-ante chance of certification	No effect on boys. For girls, heterogeneity by pre-skill characteristics
Barrow et al. (2010)			X	Increase in total credits taken but does not cause students to enroll in easier courses	
Incentives on Outputs in Chicago and New York City (Fryer, 2010)			X	It does not increase students achievement	
Incentives on Inputs in Dallas and Washington, DC (Fryer, 2010)			X	Worked but only for certain population subgroups	
Leuven et al. (2010)			X	Positive (negative) long lasting effects on academic achievement for the academically strong (weak) students	By students pre-program ability