Getting parents involved
A field experiment in deprived schools

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Motivation

► Significant differences in parental involvement across families with different social status

► Any causal relationship between the relatively good performance at school of pupil from well-off families and the relatively strong involvement of their parents?

► Is parental involvement given or can it be influenced?
Questions

✓ Is parental involvement an input in the educational production function?
✓ Is it really possible to improve parents’ involvement?
✓ Has increased parental involvement any effect on children?
✓ Does the effect on program participants spread out on other families?

► Specific importance of spillovers as only a minority of volunteer families tend to participate in such a program
Program

► Implemented in 6th grade in deprived urban areas (20% first-generation immigrants)

► 3 parents-school head meetings during first trimester

► Who’s who in the school; everyone can help his child (but how?); what to do with report cards?

► Opportunity for parents to share experience

► Very low cost
Theory of change

- Increased parental awareness: better help + monitor children
- Translates into child behaviour + achievement
- Improves class working conditions: larger impact
- Children influence each other: larger impact
Institutional setup

- Head of school district (Paris suburban area) wants to implement that policy

- Contacts research team to setup a RCT

- Iterations to define a design acceptable to all + relevant outcomes and their means of measurement

- Convince 37 schools to enter the experiment

- Financed by the French Experimental Fund for the Youth
Why a randomized field trial?

- Assume you invite parents to the meeting
- Some come: they are treated
- Others don’t come: they are untreated

► It would be wrong to compare the outcomes of those treated and untreated, because they are likely very different
► Even conditional on observed characteristics
Why a randomized field trial?

- In our experiment, parents are more white collar and more biparental.
- But they are more often parents of boys, and with relatively bad marks.

▶ Had we compared volunteer and non-volunteer families we would have found that the treated have lower behavioral scores at the end of the year.
▶ Our randomized control trial just shows the opposite!
Design

Possible units of randomization:

- Schools
- Classes in schools
- Pupils in classes

- School randomization would make no sense with only 37 schools
- We would like to identify spillover if there is any
- The chosen design mixes pupil and class level
Design

1. Identify volunteer parents in all the schools (6th graders)
2. Within each school, randomize half classes
3. Only volunteer parents in treated classes are invited to the meetings

▶ Ensures that families in treated and control classes are similar
▶ Significant differences by the end of the year are surely attributed to the intervention
Design: Four groups

Treated Classes (randomized in)

Volunteer

Non volunteers

Control classes (randomized out)

Volunteer

Non volunteers

Compare

Compare
Sample

- 34 middle schools, 183 classes, 4,300 6th grade pupils
- 20% volunteers
- Among volunteers, actual take-up rate 50%
Outcomes

► Parental behaviour and perceptions

► Pupils’ behaviour

► Pupils’ cognitive achievement
Measurement

Comfront multiple sources

► **Parents**: year-end survey (response rate 80%)

*Individual appointments with teachers, participate in parental organization, understand local school, etc.*

► **Pupils**: Normalized tests beginning and end of year
  + school level administrative information (truancy, behaviour)

► **Teacher’s** assessment of parents’ involvement and children effort and behaviour
## Parental involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>VOLUNTEERS</th>
<th></th>
<th>NON-VOLUNTEERS</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Treated</td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>Treated</td>
<td>Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement score</td>
<td>0.157**</td>
<td>0.005</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.013</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Involvement score summarizes measures of involvement at home (e.g., monitoring homeworks), involvement at school (e.g., meeting attendance) and perceptions (e.g., satisfied with the school).

It is normalized to 0 and reads as % of standard error.
Parental involvement

- Increase about 10% to 30% of a standard-deviation

- Same order of magnitude as between white-collar and blue-collar families

- No spillover between parents

- Effect on parents translates into significant improvement in pupils’ behavior
# Pupils’ behavior and cognitive outcomes

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Treated</td>
<td>Control</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Truancy (1/2 days)</td>
<td>3.116**</td>
<td>4.173</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipl. sanctions</td>
<td>6.4%**</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Good behaviour</td>
<td>35.5%**</td>
<td>29.0%</td>
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- Some impact on teachers’ marks (may reflect behaviour in part)
- No impact on normalized, externally marked tests (but kids may have no incentive to perform)
Take away

- The programme has demonstrated effects on parental involvement and child behaviour

- The behavior of all students in the selected classes improved, including those whose parents did not participate

- Impacts can be considered quite large, although treatment is light
Policy implication

► Important issue but limited political action

► Simple and inexpensive program

► Rigorous evaluation: can convince schools or governments that such action is worth taking

► Spillover effects imply that program is desirable even if a minority participates or not the primary target

► Generalization going on in France, experiment in Chile