Gender Peer Effects in Early Childhood Education

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ABSTRACT

Early childhood education represents a pivotal developmental window which is especially sensitive to investments or insults, potentially leading to significant long-term consequences. Researchers have investigated the importance of many inputs in early childhood education production, yet the role of peers in this developmental period is much less well understood. This study fills this gap by examining the impact of gender peer effects on early childhood non-cognitive skills, as well as later education and behavioral outcomes. Understanding the impact of gender peer dynamics at an early age is particularly significant because it speaks to open questions about the socialization of young children.

This study employs unique data on cognitive and non-cognitive skills for the universe of children aged four and five in the English public education system. Exploiting variation in gender composition across cohorts within schools, the results demonstrate that a higher proportion of female peers negatively impacts socioemotional development as well as language skills for both boys and girls, but has a positive impact on numeracy skills. However, by age eleven, there are no significant effects on reading and language skills, whilst positive effects for mathematics emerge for both girls and boys. I assess for longer-term impact on education outcomes and STEM subject choice, as well as potential mechanisms driving these results, including behavioral channels and parental investment response.