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Courtney M. Cox

Lending Libraries: an Investigation Into the Educational Impact of Extracurricular Enrichment in Rural Uganda

How can the educational performance of students in rural Africa be improved? Many scholars have identified education as a key to development, however, given the numerous factors that influence educational achievement, it can often be difficult to know how students' performances might be improved. This field experiment in Uganda uncovered some of the gaps in both educational methodology and resources that hinder the learning environment in rural Ugandan schools, as well as revealed cultural dynamics, which play upon the development of social skills that may influence academic and societal achievement.

By administering a set of interviews and creative activities to a randomly selected group of students at a secondary school in an isolated Ugandan village, the behavior, creativity, and attitudes of students could be gauged. Recording their most recent academic test scores allowed for a measurement of their current academic achievement. In introducing a lending library, which consisted of games, books and magazines, students were exposed to a set of academic and social resources previously unavailable. Furthermore, a sub-group of the randomly selected students were chosen to participate in a series of activities designed to encourage them in various ways to use the newly available resources to their academic and social advantage, which will, longitudinally, tell us if encouragement enhances the effects of the library, and thus could enhance learning outcomes.

An early analysis of the interviews showed that the students, on average, are very stunted in their social development skills. Causes for this general state of uneasiness, low self-esteem and shyness can possibly be attributed to social norms, which clearly undermine the value of the child, such as the widespread use of corporal punishment that surfaced in a large majority of interviews. However, one must not underestimate the fact that students were being interviewed by a foreigner in their second language, but measures were taken to adjust the students to the interviewer in meetings prior to the interviews themselves.

In evaluating the results of the creative activities, students seem to be slowed in their analytical skills, as rote-learning methods undermine the ability of students to develop unique and critical responses to questions and use basic problem solving skills. Additionally, creativity is lacking probably due to

the fact that, culturally, individuality is suppressed, meanwhile students' exposure to varied stimuli limits the number of experiences from which they can pull ideas. Furthermore, due to the nature of the creative exercises, and even the interviews, it is clear that emotional development is inhibited, which was made obvious by the limitations in responses to questions concerning feelings and expression. This may be due to various factors, but one possibility revealed in the data is the high rate of tragedy faced within their communities combined with the cultural norm of limited expression of feelings related to these tragedies.

Observational data suggests that the library is making an immediate impact on the school in that students are utilizing the library during their free time, which in the short-term, may result in reduced boredom and increased happiness amongst students. In the long-term, an increase in English, creativity and analytical skills may be seen, although further longitudinal data collection is necessary and has been planned.

Encouragement treatment will also need to be subjected to a further longitudinal examination, as the effects of encouragement, and the library in general, cannot be known until students have had ample exposure to the resources and clear and sustained encouragement has been directed to the target-group students.

The findings, thus far, are encouraging in regards to the immediate benefit that never-before-accessed resources can have on students' well being in isolated, rural villages in Uganda. This study has also brought forth interesting questions to be further investigated regarding the impact of certain social norms on child-development and what that can mean for the development of a country in general. Further data will need to be collected in the long-term to find the real impact of encouragement techniques on the students.