

## Comments

**Sebastian Galiani:** Norbert Schady has produced a highly valuable, extremely readable empirical survey on early childhood development in Latin America and the Caribbean. Good empirical surveys like this play a very important role in the production of knowledge. Every year, the large production of applied work in most areas of economics generates new results, often based on different samples and different methodological approaches than previous studies. Some of these results are experimental or quasi-experimental, but most are derived from observational studies. In all cases, the identification of the parameters of interest in the literature under study is not straightforward, and new results often conflict with previous ones. A good survey thus scrutinizes the identification strategy of the existing research and reports the elements of those papers that are relatively solid on identification. This helps illuminate the state of empirical knowledge. The survey should also inform the audience about what is lacking in the existing research and the theoretical reasons for exploring these issues further. The paper by Schady does precisely that.

Schady focuses on the cognitive and noncognitive skills of children in the preschool years. This is a particularly important topic. Although the region's child mortality has decreased rapidly in the past decades, many surviving children continue to have poor psychosocial and cognitive development. Data on the size of the problem are extremely limited, but it is likely that millions of young children are failing to reach their potential in development. They subsequently are unable to benefit fully from schooling and to become productive citizens. This failure has implications both for the individuals and for national development.

Child development is multidimensional. These dimensions, which are interdependent, include social, emotional, cognitive, and motor performance, as well as patterns of behavior and health and nutritional status. Schady's survey does not deal with child health and nutrition *per se*, but rather addresses their impact on child skills to the extent that valid evidence is available.

Empirical knowledge is composed of probabilistic and causal relations. The latter are certainly more difficult to define and identify than the former.

Causal parameters are the fundamental building blocks of both physical reality and the human understanding of that reality. They are therefore hard to define without theory. With regard to identification, issues of internal validity need to be scrutinized case by case; issues of external validity are also of prime relevance for a survey. The extent to which these causal relations generalize is critical, especially when summarizing the causal effects of interventions. Unfortunately, the evidence for Latin America and the Caribbean on the effects of interventions on cognitive and noncognitive skill indicators is still so scarce that Schady could not take that avenue in this survey. It is a pending task that will have to await the production of much more research in this area.

Schady's review of early childhood development studies in Latin America and the Caribbean makes it clear that knowledge in this area is insufficient. Some evidence points to severe early childhood development shortfalls among the least advantaged families, but the evidence is not all that systematic. Organizations such as the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank need to promote the regular collection of systematic data sets on early childhood development that are comparable across countries. For example, the World Bank has been promoting, with reasonable success, the collection of standardized test scores in developing countries, which has proved to be extremely useful.

The paper also reviews the evidence on interventions to help disadvantaged families overcome these early childhood development shortfalls. As Schady warns, however, these conclusions rely on a few studies and are thus only tentative. The evidence on the effect of conditional cash transfers on several cognitive and noncognitive skill indicators suggests that this type of intervention might not be the most effective way to improve early childhood development in Latin America and the Caribbean. This does not mean that they are unsuccessful as anti-poverty programs; the evidence on this front is certainly more favorable.

An interesting result that emerges from some of the studies summarized in the survey is that the returns to preprimary education on cognitive and noncognitive skill indicators seem to be large. The paper for Argentina, of which I am a coauthor, has one virtue not highlighted in the survey: it shows large effects of early schooling on cognitive and noncognitive skill indicators later in life for the population at large, not just for the most disadvantaged children in society. These results are encouraging, and one might speculate that the poorest countries in the region might stimulate not only the supply of preprimary education, but also its demand. The next generation of conditional cash transfer programs could perhaps include preprimary enrollment as one of the

conditionalities. Even a country as rich as Chile seems to have plenty of room to stimulate preprimary enrollment rates. Finally, evidence indicates that programs aiming to increase early childhood stimulation and improve parenting also have large impacts on cognitive and noncognitive skill indicators, some of which last in the long term. Interestingly, there appears to be a positive interaction effect between these programs and nutrition interventions. These latter results are from a series of papers by Grantham-McGregor and her coauthors, which are an excellent example of a factorial design of an evaluation. Factorial designs should clearly be encouraged in the evaluation of programs in the region.

It is often said that the objective of program evaluation is to produce the inputs for cost-benefit analysis. One could then rank all the plausible interventions and choose among the most cost-effective ones. The profession is well beyond that, and not only in Latin America and the Caribbean. What is more, it is not clear to me that this paradigm is feasible even without considering the political arena. For one thing, that type of exercise seems to be impractical without relying on structural models that highlight how each intervention might run into some combination of diminishing returns and higher costs as programs are scaled up. This by no means diminishes the importance of program evaluation in the process of decisionmaking. Evaluation generates very valuable knowledge of what does and does not work. Thus, knowledge on social policies and programs obtained from rigorous identification strategies can greatly help to generate consensus on what policies to implement to achieve certain objectives and how to improve the existing ones. The survey by Schady describes instances of both these cases. This is particularly relevant given that all political interventions result from a complex decisionmaking process administered by political systems.

In short, rigorous analysis, when incorporated into the decisionmaking process, might play an important role in promoting good public policies, even when this process of selection cannot be based exclusively on cost-benefit analysis.<sup>1</sup>

**André Portela Souza:** Norbert Schady selectively surveys the economic literature on the topic of early childhood development in Latin America and the Caribbean. As is widely acknowledged, the region desperately needs improvements in the human capital stock of their population. If skills beget skills and learning begets learning, as persuasively argued by Cunha and others, then

1. See Galiani (2005).

investment in early childhood is an important policy for developing cognitive and noncognitive abilities and skills that can help enhance other skills later in life, close the skill gap across individuals, and compensate for adverse family environments.<sup>1</sup>

Schady's survey thus could not come at a better time. It summarizes the current knowledge, garnered through evaluations of early childhood development programs in Latin America and the Caribbean. The author divides the survey into three parts. First, after a brief theoretical discussion, he describes the most important public programs on early childhood development in the United States and the literature on their impact evaluations. Second, Schady presents selected studies on early childhood development in some countries of the region. Third, he discusses possible directions for policy and future research. The remainder of my comments briefly addresses each part.

In drawing lessons from the U.S. experience, the paper discusses two small-scale programs, the Perry Preschool Project and the Carolina Abecedarian Project, and one large-scale program, namely, Head Start. It also considers comparative evidence on various home visiting and center-plus preschool programs. Although each program has its own specificities, they all target children in the most disadvantageous conditions. The programs' impacts on outcomes later in life are generally positive and significant. Schady draws four lessons from these experiences for Latin American and the Caribbean: designing, experimenting with, and evaluating small- and large-scale programs can have sizable payoffs; correctly targeting the interventions can improve the programs' effectiveness; programs must be scaled up by making them more attractive to the groups they benefit; and the interaction between early childhood investment and later skill formation is crucial.

I endorse all four of these lessons and believe Schady would not object to my adding two more: analysts should keep sight on the longer run; and failed experiences are also important sources of knowledge. A remarkable characteristic of the two small-scale programs is that they were designed to be regularly evaluated over many years. This would enable researchers and policymakers not only to improve the programs along the way, but also to discover their long-run impacts. The Perry Preschool Project, for instance, followed the individuals randomly assigned to the treatment and control groups from three to forty years of age. This is an excellent design for learning both the overall impact on outcomes of interest and the type of intervention that works best to generate specific skills later in life. Latin America is full

1. Cunha and others (2005).

of examples of programs that started and ended right after their inception, without evaluations. The discontinuity of programs without much learning from their experiences is a characteristic of the region. The small-scale U.S. programs demonstrate the importance of maintaining evaluations over longer periods, since some positive effects can be reaped only later in life. Recently, social programs have been mushrooming across Latin America and the Caribbean. The U.S. program evaluation experience points to a trade-off between the number of different programs and the length of each program. Long-run evaluations of selected small-scale programs are essential to learning about early childhood development.

Not all the programs worked in the United States, and these failed experiences offer lessons for program designers in other countries. Home visiting programs, for example, apparently have not improved child development (at least not in the case of the programs evaluated). Program designers need to know why they did not work well. Was it a failure of the overall program, or the result of the specific way the intervention was carried out? Without careful evaluations, one would not learn from these experiences. Either one would replicate a program that does not work or discharge right off a program that may be worth fixing and improving. As Kremer asserts, publication bias may arise if only positive results are published.<sup>2</sup> Negative results must also be disseminated.

When Schady moves the discussion to Latin America and the Caribbean, he organizes the evidence around three issues. The first addresses aggregate deficits in investment in early childhood development in the region. Using cross-country data and controlling for GDP per capita, he shows that the region does not register a lower preschool enrollment rate than other countries with a similar GDP per capita. The paper presents no information on the other countries used in this comparison, but I would guess that this result is similar to other Latin American outcomes that fall between the lower extreme value of Africa and the upper extreme value of North America and western Europe. Moreover, significant variation occurs within the region. A few countries have reached almost universal coverage (for example, Costa Rica has a 91 percent gross enrollment rate), and a few others are extremely low (for example, Honduras has 21 percent). Most of the countries ranged from 30 to 70 percent. This evidence suggests that individual countries must tackle different needs. Some countries, such as Argentina, may simply need to

2. Kremer (2003).

expand their preschool supply, while others may need to improve the quality of their existing preschools.

The second issue involves the existence of a gradient between early childhood development outcomes and family socioeconomic status. Based on results from Brazil, Ecuador, and Mexico, Schady concludes that Latin American children present developmental deficits relative to reference populations in high-income countries. The sharp gradients by socioeconomic status strengthen as children age. The existence of gradients by socioeconomic status is the expected result. More surprising (at least to me) is that it increases with age. Schady speculates that the protective effect of socioeconomic status may be cumulative. Finding the causes of this growing gradient and other characteristics is an interesting line of research, since it will shed light on the importance of early childhood interventions. Horowitz and Souza explore a related issue among school-age children within families in Brazil.<sup>3</sup> They document the existence of a strong gradient of intrafamily dispersion in school progression by family socioeconomic status. They suggest that this finding may be due to family resource specialization. Although their study refers to school-age children, it raises the question of whether similar patterns are observed among very young children for other outcomes (such as nutrition and cognitive skills) and whether this earlier specialization causes the later outcomes observed.

The third issue explored by Schady in this section centers on the evaluation of the impact of early childhood programs in the region. Based on studies for Argentina, Jamaica, and Mexico, he concludes that conditional cash transfer programs may have limited success in improving early childhood development indicators. Early childhood stimulation through center-based care or preschool may be a more effective way to close developmental gaps. Since only a small number of studies examine this issue, one should be cautious about making these inferences, but it highlights the inability of the cash transfer programs to fight all poverty dimensions.

The final area I wish to address is Schady's discussion of policy and future research. Given the thin economic literature on early childhood development in Latin America and the Caribbean, Schady rightly defends the scope for experimentation and careful evaluation aimed at identifying effective policies and programs. The Jamaican and Mexican cases show that this is possible. His suggestion to use more frequently standardized, age-normed tests should be taken seriously, since it can greatly improve the profession's understanding of the deficits in the region.

3. Horowitz and Souza (2004).

The picture that ultimately arises from this survey is that while there is much to be done, the initial evidence points to high returns on early childhood development investment in the region. After reaching almost universal primary school coverage, some countries have debated whether to expand secondary or even tertiary education. Brazil, for instance, has finally achieved universal primary school enrollment. Policymakers are now discussing whether the country should expand higher education or increase hours in primary school (a four-hour school day is the norm in Brazil). This survey adds one more possibility that should be considered by policymakers if their goal is to improve the human capital of the region efficiently.

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