Inside the “black-box” of schools:
Empirical evidence on the different dimensions of learning
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Abstract

An emerging body of research has underscored the key role of factors other than academic scores, which influence students’ learning. Small schools have been championed as a solution to the apparent dichotomy between an academic or non-academic focus. In Chapters 2 and 3, I use a rigorous research design to answer the question of whether small schools do indeed provide a more personal and familiar context than large impersonal schools. Chapter 2, drawing from evidence from small public high schools in NYC, shows that there is selection into schools of different sizes and that important differences exist between the learning environments of old and new small schools. Learning environments are better in old small schools relative to new small schools and worse in large schools but only relative to the old small schools.

Chapter 3 further examines the arguments made in favor of small schools by providing evidence from Mexico. The findings in this chapter suggest that small high schools in Mexico are a mixed blessing. Academic outcomes in small schools are no different than in large schools and their learning environment is not necessarily better. Academic expectations are lower and interpersonal relationships among students and teachers are worse or similar than in large schools. Nonetheless, in every dimension of social behavior small schools are better than large ones.

Finally, in Chapter 4, I aim at providing a better understanding of ways to improve learning by understanding how fitness and academic skills are formed and relate to each other. I use a framework developed by Cunha and Heckman (2007) and estimate a dynamic factor analysis model of fitness and academic skill formation. My findings show that fitness and academic skills show high persistence over time. There are also some important dynamic interactions: while fitness skills do not seem to impact academic skills, past academic achievement has a large positive impact on fitness skills. Finally, my results underscore the importance of considering separate technologies for different ethnic groups.