

Popularity and Student Networks

Trade-offs in Resolving Social Isolation through Deskmate Assignments

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Abstract

Social connections matter for educational outcomes, non-cognitive skills and long run labour market returns. Using a sample of 12,842 students from India, we first show that relatively isolated students face a host of socio-emotional and academic disadvantages. We then implement a two-tier randomized deskmate matching intervention based on popularity to improve the outcomes of these isolated students. Results from the two-tier experiment reveal an interesting trade-off. Within the classroom, matching isolated students with each other improves their social connections with the rest of the class, interactions with teachers and social / non-cognitive skills. However, across classrooms, matching a majority of isolated students to most popular peers as deskmates improves their social integration with no change in social and non-cognitive skills. Our findings suggest that optimal matching plans need to account for both direct and group level effects which may produce equity-efficiency trade-offs.

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Throughout the document, I address the findings of the project collectively to highlight the efforts of the research and implementation team who were instrumental in making the project a success. The merits of the project are equally shared with them. All errors and omissions are my own.