Late Bloomers: Parental Safety Net for Middle Class Children in India

Sonalde Desai and Reeve Vanneman

Introduction:

In recent years there has been a great interest in individual heterogeneity and why some individuals survive and overcome adverse conditions and others do not. Research on highly sensitive children suggests that some children are like dandelions, impervious to a diverse set of conditions; others are like orchids and require careful cultivation (Belsky, Bakermans-Kranenburg, and Ijzendoorn 2007). Others studies note that some individuals are like Picasso, brilliantly creative from age 20 and others are like Cezanne whose creativity blossoms late in life (Galenson 2009). If we recognize that some individuals may require more nurturing than others; some may bloom early in life and others late, how does it influence our discourse surrounding inequality of opportunity in educational outcomes?

Dalton Conley provides some interesting illustrations (Conley 2004). Why does the same family spawn William Jefferson Clinton, the Rhodes scholar and President of the United States and Roger Clinton, who at his most addicted snorted cocaine 16 times a day? Contrast this divergence with the Kennedy brothers and the Bush brothers who emerged successfully in spite of early episodes of alcohol abuse and trouble with law (Hout 2004). Parental social class is arguably the most distinctive difference between the two. When children from upper social classes face trouble, parental resources provide a safety net that allows to them to overcome this early setback; children from less privileged background rarely get second chances.

There is much to be learnt about inequality from the processes through which middle class parents cushion their vulnerable children and provide a safety net that allows them to recover lost ground. This issue is particularly salient in a social context where social mobility is sharply limited (Guha and Parry 1999) and educational system is comparatively rigid and unforgiving (Govinda 2002).

In this paper, we examine education attainment of Indian youth, conditional on their early achievement. We ask: How do parental social class shape educational trajectories of children at varying levels of early achievement? Access to India Human Development Survey, a longitudinal survey of over 41,000 households and about 10,000 children surveyed in both 2004-5 and 2011-12, allows us an opportunity to address this question.

Data – India Human Development Survey:

This paper is based on two waves of data from the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) conducted in 2004-5 and 2011-12. This survey was organized by the authors in collaboration with colleagues from the National Council

of Applied Economic Research (NCAER) in New Delhi. It is a survey of 41,554 households spread across 33 states and Union Territories of India and represent over 99% of the Indian population. Sample includes 1500 villages and 971 urban blocks nationwide. The survey instrument is translated in 12 languages and the survey was carried out via face-to-face interviews.

In 2011-12, the same households were interviewed again and about 83% were included in the follow up wave with rural recontact rate being over 90% while the urban recontact rate was about 72%. For the households that separated from the original household and were still living in the village or town of original, full interviews were conducted while proxy information was obtained for migrants as long as at least one original household member was available to respond to proxy questions. Full educational history was obtained during household interview; for migrant basic proxy information regarding completed years of education was obtained.

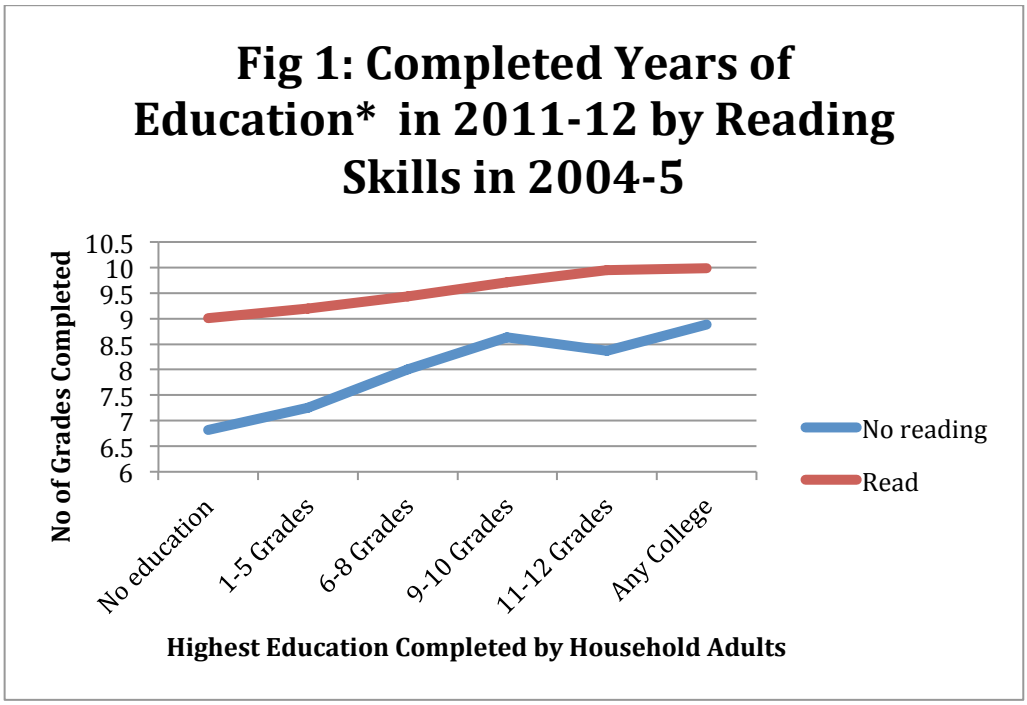
In 2004-5, children ages 8-11 were administered a simple reading, writing and arithmetic test developed by one of best known education NGOs, PRATHAM (Pratham 2005). Our past research indicates that only about half the children were able to read a 3 sentence paragraph and do basic two digit subtractions. While parental socioeconomic background played an important role in shaping these learning outcomes (Desai, Adams, and Dubey 2009, Desai et al. 2009), this relationship was not perfect and as Table 1 indicates, even children from educated and rich families often performed poorly on these tests.

Table 1: Skill levels of Children Ages 8-11 in 2004-5			
	Read Simple Paragraph	**Do Two Digit Subtractions**	**Write one sentence**
All India	**54%**	**48%**	**67%**
Sex			
Male	56%	51%	69%
Female	52%	45%	65%
Current Standard			
0	17%	13%	34%
1	11%	11%	33%
2	27%	25%	49%
3	48%	42%	63%
4	66%	56%	75%
Place of Residence			
Metro	69%	70%	82%
Other Urban	67%	61%	76%
More dev village	54%	47%	67%
Less dev village	47%	40%	61%
Income			
Lowest Quantile	45%	38%	63%
Second quantile	45%	38%	60%
Third Quantile	51%	45%	64%
Fourth Quantile	61%	53%	71%
Top Quantile	73%	69%	80%
Social Groups			
Forward Caste Hindu	71%	63%	79%
OBC	56%	49%	67%
Dalit	44%	39%	60%
Adivasi	46%	37%	60%
Muslim	45%	40%	60%
Other Religion	79%	78%	89%
Household Educ.			
None	35%	30%	52%
1-4 std	46%	37%	61%
5-9 std	55%	47%	67%
10-11 std	66%	61%	76%
12 Std/Some College	72%	66%	82%
Graduate/Diploma	80%	75%	87%

In this paper, we examine the educational attainment of these children conditional on their prior achievement using a multivariate regression model.

Preliminary Results:

Results from preliminary regressions of completed years of education on skill levels in 2004-5 are presented below. We hold parental income, education, place of residence, child's age and gender are held constant in these regressions. The results show a strong interaction effect between markers of parental social class (education and income) and early skill levels. Predicted years of completed schooling are plotted in Figure 1. In the underlying regression we hold all other background factors at their mean value and plots number of years of completed schooling for children who could read a simple paragraph in 2004 and those who could not by highest level of education in the household.



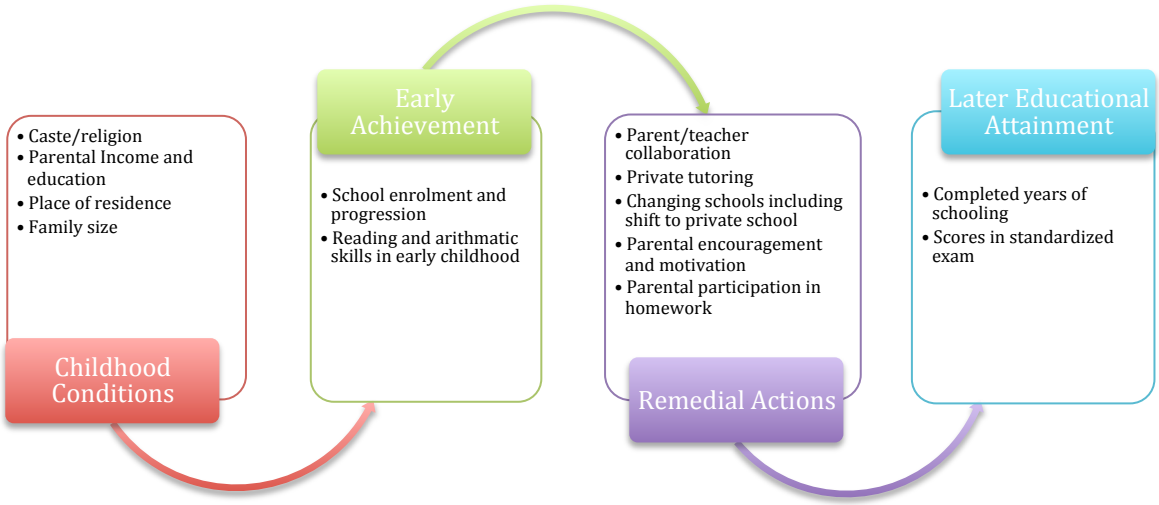
* Predicted value from multivariate regressions, holding child's sex, age, parental income, place of residence and state of residence at their mean values.

As one might expect, children who were highly skilled in 2004-5 have completed more years of schooling by 2011-12 than those who could not read. For these children, differences by parental social class are rather small. But among the children who could not read in 2004-5, children with educated parents have made significant strides while those whose parents have low levels of education are left behind. Similar results are obtained for other markers of social class such as household income.

This focus on educational trajectory is important. Parental background, caste, religion and social class play an important role in early achievements. However, in this paper we show that their role is not limited to early achievements but continues throughout the educational life cycle. Children who are early bloomers are less affected by parental safety net than the late bloomers.

How does the parental safety net operate? An examination of these processes forms the core of this paper. We hypothesize that parental safety net is put in place to overcome early deficiencies by taking remedial actions. In the Indian context these remedial actions include talking to teachers, participating in PTA activities, seeking additional tutoring, providing more homework supervision at home and as a last resort, changing schools.

Fig 2: Process Underlying Educational Catch Up



The IHDS survey collected data on markers of many of these remedial actions, allowing us to explore their role in improving the educational outcomes for the children who were at a lower skill spectrum in round 1. While we only have snapshots of some of these behaviors and not a full history over the seven years between the two surveys, an examination of these mechanisms could be instructive and will be included in the final paper.

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