

INSPIRATIONAL OR DEMOTIVATIONAL: EXPERIMENTAL EVIDENCE ON THE IMPACTS OF ROLE MODELS^{*} [†]

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Abstract

High-achieving role models can inspire people and raise aspirations, but may negatively affect some individuals who fail to meet their goals. I study what role model characteristics influence their effectiveness in improving academic performance. Using a randomized controlled trial with students across five middle schools in China, I compare the impacts of role models with different success levels. Two months later, students exposed to higher-achieving role models improved test scores by 0.07-0.18 standard deviations on average, whereas those exposed to moderately achieving role models experienced a 28.8% and 26.6% reduction in the likelihood of depression and stress, respectively. Higher-achieving role models improve low-performing girls' academic outcomes but negatively affect their mental health, as these girls invested more effort but still found their improved performance falling short of their elevated aspirations. This paper highlights the negative impacts of role models on mental health as a trade-off for enhancing performance in underperforming subgroups, emphasizing the need to consider mental health when implementing role model interventions.

Keywords: Role models; Mental health; Secondary education; Gender; China.

JEL codes: J16, J24, J70, I25, I21, O12.

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