MICHELA CARLANA

Michela Carlana is an Assistant Professor of Public Policy at the Harvard Kennedy School. From researching the subtle role of bias and motivation in student outcomes to rapidly launching and evaluating scalable programs to combat learning loss, Michela's work reflects a commitment to reducing inequality through focusing on education, gender, and migration.

Michela's work is driven by a long-held conviction in the power of education and its ability to help individuals actualize skills and opportunities for a better future. Yet, "many children are left behind when they are induced into early educational choices that do not allow them to achieve their full potential," she notes. Holding this idea that "opportunity begets opportunity," her research focuses on identifying inequities in education and programs that may help close the gaps.

"I go after deep economic issues and think about concrete policy interventions that may help address those challenges," Michela explains. Recognizing that stereotypes and cultural norms are often a subtle but widespread barrier to equality, Michela's research has explored the impacts of revealing teachers' implicit biases.

In her home country of Italy, Michela and co-authors evaluated the impact of informing teachers of their implicit stereotypes towards immigrant students on end-of-year grading, finding that teachers unaware of their biases gave better grades once they were made aware.

> "*A key component of my work is observing and talking with individuals, especially students, teachers, and parents, to shape my research questions.*"

To generate evidence on policy-relevant issues, Michela grounds her research in discussions with the populations she hopes to serve. "A key component of my work is observing and talking with individuals, especially students, teachers, and parents, to shape my research questions," she describes. A conversation with a teacher while on a data collection visit inspired Michela to focus on implicit bias as a constraint to opportunity: "One of the teachers told me she recommended the vocational track to a high-performing immigrant student because 'you never know whether immigrant children can get the necessary family support to do well during high school.'"

J-PAL
ABDUL LATIF JAMEEL POVERTY ACTION LAB

HARVARD
UNIVERSITY

> **There are few interventions in the economics of education that have proven as effective as tutoring in helping students achieve.**

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Michela saw governments' focus on increasing access to technology to address learning losses as insufficient to tackle the deep challenges students were facing, including a sense of isolation that affected not only their learning, but also their psychological well-being. In 2020, she, along with frequent co-author Eliana La Ferrara, pioneered the Tutoring Online Project (TOP), a virtual program aiming to close the education gap for disadvantaged students during the pandemic.

They were able to leverage extensive past experience in conducting educational interventions in Italian schools to rapidly launch and evaluate this intervention amidst the pandemic. Their results provided crucial insight into a scalable program that could be implemented across countries lagging behind with school reopenings. "There are few interventions in the economics of education that have proven as effective as tutoring in helping students achieve," Michela notes.

Michela's relentless dedication to studying constraints to equality of opportunities in education is evident in her work. She continues to create and evaluate programs that help close educational gaps.

Michela Carlana has been a J-PAL affiliate since 2020. For more information about J-PAL and to read about Michela's research, visit povertyactionlab.org/person/carlana.

Spotlight author: Jiayi Qian

RESEARCH TO POLICY: ONLINE TUTORING TO IMPROVE LEARNING AND WELL-BEING

Challenge: Millions of students across the world are falling behind as a result of school closures and unequal access to educational resources amid closures linked to the Covid-19 pandemic. Tutoring programs may offer an effective and reliable method to improve students' learning outcomes.

Research: In 2020, Michela and her collaborator Eliana La Ferrara evaluated the effectiveness of providing individual online tutoring for students from disadvantaged backgrounds in Italy. The program provided free individual online tutoring—carried out by volunteer university students trained by pedagogical experts—to disadvantaged middle school students.

Results: The online tutoring program substantially increased students' academic performance as well as socio-emotional skills, aspirations, and well-being. These impacts were particularly evident in students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and, in the case of well-being, for immigrant children.

Scaling: Following the favorable outcomes of the intervention, Michela and Eliana are working on a new platform for the project to improve security and ease of implementation at scale. In Italy, they formed a partnership with a local foundation and are scaling up the intervention to 3,000 children with support of the Ministry of Education. In the 2021-22 school year, they are expanding the reach of TOP by piloting the program in Brazil, the Dominican Republic, and Uruguay.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Current university:
Harvard University

Email:
michela_carlana@hks.harvard.edu

Education:
- BA and MSc; (Economics), University of Padua
- PhD (Economics), Bocconi University

Other affiliations:
Affiliated faculty, LEAP-Bocconi; Research affiliate, CEPR; Research affiliate, IZA

Research interests:
Education, labor, gender, migration