The Impact of a Voluntary Summer Reading Program on Low-Income Latinx Children in the United States

Researchers:

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Sector(s): Education

Location: California, United States of America

Sample: 400 children

Target group: Students

Outcome of interest: Student learning

Intervention type: Tailored instruction

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Low-income children from language minority families may fall behind in reading comprehension and vocabulary during summer vacation because of their limited access to books at home and limited opportunities to practice English with family members. To address this issue, researchers examined the impact of a voluntary summer reading program among low-income Latinx children from language minority homes. Results demonstrated that, although children reported reading more books, their reading test scores and the frequency with which they read with parents did not improve.

Policy issue

On average, summer vacation creates a three month gap in reading scores between middle- and low-income children.[1] Low-income children from language minority families in the United States may be especially vulnerable to falling behind during summer vacation. Their opportunities to exercise reading skills may be limited by minimal access to books at home or their parents may lack the English proficiency needed to help their children practice. Previous research suggests that providing native English-speaking children with appropriately difficult texts along with teacher scaffolding (additional support to help students gradually progress towards independent learning) can improve test scores in comprehension and vocabulary. Can book distribution and scaffolding, if complemented by a parent-training program, mitigate the loss of reading skills during summer vacation among low-income children in language minority families?

Context of the evaluation

This study replicated a voluntary summer reading program tested previously by the researchers through three evaluations in a Virginia school district serving mostly native English-speaking households. The results of the prior studies suggested that voluntary summer reading programs can be effective in promoting comprehension, especially for children with adequate independent reading skills and when the books appropriately match the children's reading level.[2]

In this replication, researchers partnered with a California public school district with more than 50,000 pupils enrolled in kindergarten through twelfth grade. Over 90 percent of the children in the study were Latinx, received a free lunch subsidy, and

came from homes where Spanish was the primary language spoken by parents. Nearly three-quarters of the sample were identified as English language learners based on California Department of Education criteria.



A woman reads a book with a young child

Photo credit: Shutterstock

Details of the intervention

In 2007, researchers tested the impact of a voluntary summer reading program on preventing loss of English language comprehension and vocabulary during summer vacation among low-income Latinx students from language minority families in four public schools in a high-poverty school district in California. Researchers randomly assigned 370 fourth grade children to one of three groups.

Book Distribution Group: Children in the book distribution group received scaffolding through reading strategy lessons prior to summer vacation. In May 2007, teachers attended a two-hour training and in the last month of school delivered lessons on comprehension strategies and reading aloud with family members to their classes. In June 2007, children picked out a wish list of books at the schools' book fairs. Researchers narrowed each child's wish list to ten titles that best matched his or her reading level and mailed the books home at the beginning of vacation.

Literacy Events Group: Like the book distribution group, children in the literacy events group also sat for reading strategy lessons and received books. They additionally received an invitation to attend three family literacy events with their parents during July and August 2007. These two-hour events, which included dinner to promote attendance, reinforced the reading comprehension activities taught in the classroom during the last month of school and encouraged parents to help children apply them at home.

Comparison Group: Children in the comparison group sat for reading strategy lessons, but they did not receive books or invitations to participate in summer literacy events.

At the beginning and end of summer vacation, children took a test measuring reading comprehension and vocabulary and spoke with researchers about their reading habits.

Results and policy lessons

The results suggest that, for children who are acquiring English language proficiency, a voluntary reading program that includes teacher-directed instruction and expands access to books may be one way to increase reading. However, the program did not lead to improvements in comprehension and vocabulary.

Impact on Number of Books Read: Children in the book distribution and literacy events groups read more titles over summer vacation than the comparison group; these children were roughly 21 percentage points (47 percent) more likely to report reading six or more books relative to the comparison group, in which only 46 percent reported doing so. There was no significant difference in the number of books read between the book distribution group and the literacy events group.

Impact on Frequency of Reading with Parents: Neither the book distribution program nor the literacy events had any impact on the frequency with which children read with a parent. Across all groups, the majority of children reported reading with parents twice a month or less.

Impact on Reading Comprehension and Vocabulary: The reading comprehension and vocabulary skills of children in the book distribution or summer literacy event groups did not improve as measured by posttests administered at the end of summer vacation. Across all groups, average scores fell from the 24th percentile at the pretest to the eighteenth percentile at the posttest.

Researchers suggest several possible explanations for the lack of impact on test scores in this evaluation, compared with their earlier studies conducted among mostly native English-speaking children. Firstly, these children—the majority of whom had low reading levels and were English learners—may have lacked the independent reading skills researchers previously identified as important for the effectiveness of summer reading programs. Moreover, unlike the researchers' previous studies, children had a say in the books they received, many of which exceeded their reading levels. The mismatch may have diminished the value of the books in improving comprehension and vocabulary. Additionally, low attendance at the literacy events may have undermined their effectiveness; most families in the literacy events group (55 percent) did not attend any events, evidence that few parents received training in helping children practice their reading skills. More research is needed to tailor summer reading programs to low-income language-minority children.

Kim, James S., and Jonathan Guryan. "The efficacy of a voluntary summer book reading intervention for low-income Latino children from language minority families." Journal of Educational Psychology 102, no. 1 (2010): 20.

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1. Cooper, H., Nye, B., Charlton, K., Lindsay, J., & Greathouse, S. (1996). The effects of summer vacation on achievement test scores: A narrative and meta-analytic review. Review of Educational Research, 66, 227-268.

2. Kim, J. S., & White, T. G. 2008. "Scaffolding voluntary summer reading for children in Grades 3 to 5: An experimental study." Scientific Studies of Reading 12: 1-23.