

Improving Early Reading Skills for Children in Poverty

What if it takes more than quality teaching to help low-income children learn to read?

Almost 70 percent of low-income fourth grade students cannot read at a basic level, according to the US Department of Education. Facts such as this were the impetus for Reading First which was created as part of the 2002 No Child Left Behind Act. Like many reading programs, Reading First focuses exclusively on instructional methods. The idea is that if you provide quality, evidence-based lessons by good teachers, students will perform better in reading.

But what if this premise is not entirely correct? What if it takes more than quality teaching to help low-income children learn to read? Researchers from FPG Child Development Institute and the School of Education at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill found that classroom and school characteristics had a larger effect on student's long-term reading abilities than the method of instruction or the child's background.

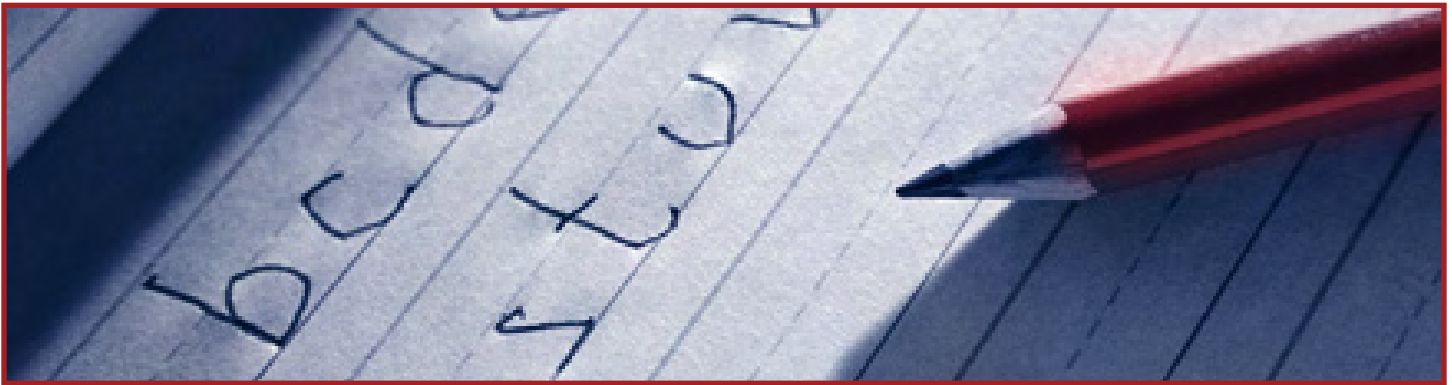
Specifically, they found that children attending minority segregated schools—schools where the minority population exceeded 75 percent of the student enrollment—underperformed even after controlling for the quality of their literacy instruction, the reading abilities of the classroom peer group, and characteristics of the students and their families. A noteworthy finding considering that the majority of Black and Hispanic children attend such schools, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

Researchers also found that the percentage of struggling readers in a classroom negatively influenced every student's reading performance, erasing any benefits of comprehensive literacy instruction.



Participants

The study examined reading development from kindergarten to third grade for 1,913 economically disadvantaged children. The children were part of The Children from Early Childhood Longitudinal Study—Kindergarten Cohort, a nationally representative sample of over 22,000 children enrolled in



approximately 1,000 kindergarten programs during the 1998–1999 school year. This study includes a subset of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study who:

- Entered public kindergarten in 1998,
- Progressed to third grade by 2002,
- Lived in families with incomes below 200 percent of the 1998 poverty threshold,
- Did not have an Individual Education Program in kindergarten, and
- Performed assessments in English.

Methodology

The study considered four levels of variables—child, family, classroom, and school. Children were assessed in basic reading skills, vocabulary, and comprehension.

Child variables included gender, race, and age at first reading assessment.

Family variables were determined by telephone interviews with the children's primary caregiver during the fall and spring of kindergarten, first grade, and third grade. Caregivers provided information on child characteristics, family structure, employment patterns, income, household size, parent education, and family literacy practices. Literacy practices examined included how often parents read books to children, children looked at books independently, children read or pretended to read to themselves or others, and families visited the library during the kindergarten year.

Classroom variables were determined by written questionnaires completed by teachers in the fall and spring of kindergarten, and the spring of first and third grades. Teachers reported the number of children reading below grade level as well as the frequency at which they taught specific literacy concepts and at which students participated in specific literacy activities.

School variables were determined by written questionnaires completed by school administrators when the children were in kindergarten.

Findings

There has been a lot of research on how child and family characteristics affect children's academic development, but less on the impact of classroom and school characteristics on reading development over time. This study found that while child and family characteristics were better predictors of initial reading skills at kindergarten entry, they did not predict reading development through third grade. Findings include:

- A single school-level variable explained children's performance in reading above and beyond their expected trajectories. Minority segregation significantly accounted for children's reading performance at the end of kindergarten, first and third grade.
- The percentage of struggling readers in a classroom negatively influences student reading performance on par with the benefits of comprehensive literacy instruction. Children attending kindergarten classrooms with higher percentages of students reading below grade level demonstrated constrained performance in reading at the end of kindergarten. The same was true for children in first grade.
- Children who attended full-day kindergarten had enhanced reading performance at the end of kindergarten.

The findings support policies that promote comprehensive reading instruction, yet indicate that just as much attention needs to be paid to ensuring that schools are integrated and to reducing classroom concentrations of children reading below grade level. ■

To Learn More

Kainz, K., & Vernon-Feagans, L. (2007) The ecology of early reading development for children in poverty. *The Elementary School Journal*, 107(5), 407–427.