

# Reading Aloud to Children, Social Inequalities and Vocabulary Development: Evidence from a Randomized Controlled Trial

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## The shared book reading intervention

We designed a four-month intervention that integrated a school-based book loan along with information on the benefits of shared book reading (SBR) for children and provided tips for effective reading practices. We did this using weekly flyers, a short phone call and six text messages sent to the parents. This intervention was aimed at fostering children's language skills by enhancing the frequency and the quality of parent-child interactions around books. To assess the impact of this intervention, we used a randomized experiment, which involved a large, random sample of 4-year olds (N=1880) who attended 47 pre-primary schools located in the city of Paris. This evaluation design marks a significant improvement over previous studies in that the results are applicable to a much larger population. Our large sample size, sampling design and high participation rates of schools and families helped us achieve this outcome.

## Important features of the SBR

Three features of this intervention are especially important. First, it was focused on accessibility of information messages for families with low education and an immigrant background. Second, the intervention has an intensive and continued format, aimed at fostering a persistent change in parenting routines. Third, its focus on parent-child interactions around books and the enjoyment of this activity for both parents and kids.

## Main findings

SBR had a large effect on the weekly practice of this activity, which was fostered by 14 percentage points compared to the families in the control groups. We hypothesised that parents have unequal access to information about the potential of SBR for child development and school success. High-educated parents access this information more easily through expert sources and via their social

networks. We found that indeed this intervention fosters book reading frequency only among parents with low education. This equalizing impact is an important finding against the background of previous research reporting that low-status families tend to benefit less from this kind of program. Moreover, the intervention impacts book reading frequency to the same extent for native and immigrant families, despite the language barriers faced by the latter. Moreover, the intervention also significantly enhanced children's language skills, as measured by the PPVT-like test of receptive vocabulary. The effect size for the main treatment effect ranges from 0.12 at the post-test to 0.16 at the follow-up. The effect size at the follow-up was 0.23 for children from low-educated families, while it was much smaller and not significantly different from zero for children of tertiary-educated parents. Hence, the equalizing impacts of this SBR intervention involved also children's language skills. Moreover, the intervention had stronger impacts in schools with initially low involvement in reading-related activities and with low educational resources.

## Policy implications

These positive impacts are substantively important for three reasons. First, treatment effects are persistent six months after the end of the intervention. Second, the magnitude of treatment effects is far from negligible, if we consider the short duration of the treatment, as well as its low marginal cost: we estimated that, if this intervention was scaled up, it would approximately cost 5 U.S. dollars per child. Third, school principals and teachers consistently reported a positive reception of the intervention by children, parents, and teachers. The workload for teachers is limited, which further enhances the scalability of this programme.