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Examining the core: Relations among reading curricula, poverty, and first through third grade reading achievement[☆]

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Abstract

Policy changes at the federal and state level are endeavoring to improve student achievement at schools serving children from lower-SES homes. One important strategy is the focus on using evidence-based core reading curricula to provide a consistent framework for instruction across schools. However, rarely have these curricula undergone rigorous comparative testing. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to compare the effects of six core reading curricula on oral reading fluency growth, while appraising whether these effects differ by grade level and for children living in lower

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socioeconomic (SES) households. Over 30,000 students in first through third grade Florida Reading First classrooms comprise this academically and economically diverse cross-sectional. Hierarchical Linear Modeling was used to model latent growth curves for students' reading fluency scores over the school year. Growth curves revealed differences across curricula as well as between students of lower and higher SES, suggesting that reading fluency growth trajectories for curricula varied depending on student SES and grade level. Findings indicate that while there are similarities among curricula, they sometimes differ in their ability to promote reading skill growth. Differences by grade level and SES were also detected. However, many of these differences were small. Implications for the use of curriculum as a conduit for improving reading instruction are discussed.

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Socioeconomic status (SES) has been identified as a unique contributor to academic achievement (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Duncan & Raudenbush, 1999; Duncan, Yeung, Brooks-Gunn, & Smith, 1998; Hart & Risley, 1995; Raudenbush, 2004). On national literacy assessments, students in lower SES homes continue to score lower than students in homes that do not qualify for free lunch programs (Lee, Griggs, & Donahue, 2007). Students' SES when entering school not only influences their early academic outcomes, but also the sustainability of average and above-average achievement (Duncan et al., 1998; Wyner, Bridgeland & DiIulio, 2007). Specifically, children from lower-SES homes often begin school with weaker language and literacy skills than do children from higher-SES homes (Entwisle & Alexander, 1993; Hart & Risley, 1995), and students who are not at grade level upon completion of first grade have dramatically lower chances of being on or above grade level later in elementary school (Spira, Bracken, & Fischel, 2005; Wyner et al., 2007). Taken together, these factors may contribute to the high incidence of failure and delayed reading skill acquisition among children living in lower-SES homes.

Research on academic difficulties related to socioeconomic factors points to SES influences before and after entrance to school (Evans, 2004; Kozol, 1991; Lee & Burkam, 2002; Rothstein, 2004). Prior to school, students from lower-SES families tend to have fewer literacy opportunities compared to their higher-SES peers. Such differences may include having fewer books in the home (Evans, 2004; Lee & Burkam, 2002; Vernon-Feagans, Hammer, Miccio, & Manlove, 2002; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998) and attending lower-quality preschools, if students have these opportunities at all (McCoach, O'Connell, Reis, & Levitt, 2006; NICHD-ECCRN, 2002). Such differences may be related to the acquisition of early reading skills (Arnold & Doctoroff, 2003; Duncan, Yeung, Brooks-Gunn, & Smith, 1998; Lee & Burkam, 2002; Yeung, Linver, & Brooks-Gunn, 2002), and may also lead to lower achievement in subsequent grades if efforts are not made to accelerate students' learning (Wyner et al., 2007).

Once students begin school, differences between lower- and higher-SES students may be as much related to poor quality academic experiences and interactions as to home characteristics (Aikens & Barbarin, 2008). Specific lags associated with lower-SES students include a delayed ability to identify letters and words and a lack of phonological sensitivity (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998) often thought to be attributable to less experienced teachers (Haycock, 2000), less family involvement in school and classroom activities (Evans, 2004),

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