FOSTERING THE LANGUAGE SKILLS OF CHILDREN FROM LOW-EDUCATED FAMILIES: AN EX-ANTE EXPERIMENTAL EVALUATION OF A PARENTAL READING INITIATIVE

The project in a nutshell: Assessing whether a light-touch intervention that encourages parents to read books to their children can improve the children’s language skills and enjoyment of reading. The intervention targets the parents of children aged 4 attending pre-primary schools in disadvantaged neighbourhoods of the city of Paris. The intervention provides free books to read to the families, as well as information on the benefits of reading and informal counseling for an effective reading. We administer a test of receptive vocabulary before and after the treatment.

Motivation
The literature indicates that skill development is a dynamic process: the early years lay the foundations for school success. Thus, early interventions promoting basic skills such as language skills are of critical importance, even more in France, where the average level of language skills in primary education is comparatively low and inequalities in skill development are strong.

 Widening access to early child care is not enough, because toddlers spend around half of their time under the supervision of their parents. We must improve the learning opportunities in the family environment. Empowering low-educated families is a priority.

Parental book reading may be an effective leverage: it is accessible for families with limited cultural and economic resources and it only takes few minutes a day. However, there is little causal evidence on the effects of this practice and the few existing studies do not unequivocally confirm its effectiveness.

Sampling and randomisation
Random sample of 22 pre-primary schools of the 18th, 19th and 20th arrondissements of Paris, N=922 children, 44 classes.

We use a cluster random assignment design: within each school, we randomly assign all 4-year students of one or two classes to the treatment and the others to the control status.

Intervention design
Each family receives:

- a) two books to read every week;
- b) six brochures on the benefits of book reading and some informal counseling for an effective reading;
- c) one phone call and six text messages reiterating these messages.

Outcomes
The main outcome is receptive vocabulary, a major predictor of school success in adolescence, measured using the French adaptation of the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test. Moreover, we have developed a similar test targeting the specific vocabulary of the books and we measure parents’ and children’s reading enjoyment and reading frequency.

First results
Analyses conducted during the first year revealed that this intervention had a positive effect on the frequency of shared reading and on children’s language skills. Most interestingly, according to the researchers, this progress essentially benefitted students from the least educated and immigrant families. The program was less effective for the most socially privileged families who for the most part already practice shared reading. The program was also more effective for boys than for girls. In general, reading books is a gendered activity that is principally practiced by mothers and most often destined for girls.

The program encouraged the participation of fathers – one of the challenges – as well as that of other family members: older brothers and sisters, grandparents.

With a view to expanding the intervention, greater teacher involvement in each school is being considered, especially to follow up and dialogue with the parents.