

Children's Health Prior to School Entry and Reading Skills in the First Year of Primary School: Identifying Protective Factors

Authors : Karine Tétreault, H el ene Desrosiers and Jean-Fran ois Cardin (Institut de la statistique du Qu ebec, Direction des enqu etes longitudinales et sociales)

ABSTRACT

Background

Reading skills at school entry are one of the main determinants of future academic performance.¹ Therefore, less than optimal health during the first years of life can affect the capacity for learning,² which in turn can have an impact on health and social adjustment throughout life. The main goal of this analysis was to examine the impact of young children's health trajectories on their reading skills in the first year of primary school (Grade 1), as assessed by their teachers.

Methods

The analysis was based on data collected annually during the first eight years of the *Qu ebec Longitudinal Study of Child Development* (QLSCD 1998-2010). The target population included all children (singleton births, excluding premature) born to mothers in 1997-1998 residing in Qu ebec, Canada. A regression analysis was conducted to examine the impact of health trajectories from birth to school entry on reading skills in Grade 1. Interactions was tested to ascertain to what degree stimulation activities in the pre-school period such as family reading habits, the mother's verbal and emotional skills, and daycare attendance can contribute to reducing inequalities in reading skills between children with less than optimal health and their peers.

Findings

The results revealed that less than optimal health, particularly in early childhood, was associated with lower reading skills in the first year of primary school. Therefore, certain health problems in young children may affect their capacity to learn well before formal education in reading has begun at school. However, the significant association with health trajectories decreased when the mother's educational level entered into the model, the latter being revealed as one of the variables with the strongest association with children's reading performance. All things being equal, higher verbal and emotional skills in the mother as assessed by the interviewer when the children were very young seemed to be a protective factor in children who were more vulnerable in terms of their health status.

Research and policy implications:

Given the importance of reading skills for success in school and future social adjustment, it will be important to conduct further analyses in order to gain a better understanding of protective factors in children at higher risk because of health problems or the low educational level of the parents. Activates designed to improve parenting skills and/or stimulate interest in reading may contribute to fostering learning skills in reading in the first year of primary school in the most vulnerable populations.

¹ DUNCAN, G. J., C. J. DOWSETT, A. CLAESSENS, K. MAGNUSON, A. HUSTON, P. KLEBANOV, L. PAGANI, L. FEINSTEIN, M. ENGEL, J. BROOKS-GUNN, H.R. SEXTON, K. DUCKWORTH, & C. JAPEL (2007). "School readiness and later achievement," *Developmental Psychology*, vol. 43, no. 6, p. 1426-1446.

² DESROSIERS H., and A. DUCHARME (2008). *Poverty, Child Health, and Cognitive Development at Age 6: Some results from the Qu ebec Longitudinal Study of Child Development (QLSCD, Canada)*, poster presented at the 20th Biennial ISSBD Meeting, Wurzburg (Germany), July 15, 2009.