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The effect of reading aloud daily—Differential effects of reading to native-born German and Turkish-origin immigrant children

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ABSTRACT

Literature that examines possible heterogeneous effects of reading aloud to children of immigrants and children of native-born parents is scarce. The current study tries to address this scarcity by examining the effects of daily parent–child reading activities on the German vocabulary knowledge of children with ($n = 531$) and without migration background ($n = 499$) between the ages of three to five. Using propensity score matching (PSM), determinants of reading aloud daily to children are analyzed in the first step. Native parents are found to be more likely to read aloud daily to their children. Parents' education, cultural capital and a high frequency of engaging parenting practices also predict the frequency of parent–child reading. Factors specific to immigrant families are the age of migration and the primary family language. The effect of reading aloud on the vocabulary skills of children is the focus of the second part of the analysis. Positive effects are found among children of immigrants and children of native-born parents. However, this positive effect is reduced over time for native children. Overall, reading aloud daily is most effective among children of immigrant families, using the language of the host country as the primary family language, and among parents with good receiving country language skills.

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1. Introduction

In the educational systems of most western countries, children of immigrants perform worse than native children (Heath & Brinbaum, 2007; Stanat & Christensen, 2006).

A major cause for the performance discrepancy are their less well-developed receiving country language skills compared to natives (Kristen et al., 2011). This disadvantage in host country language abilities already exists in early childhood even before children attend primary schools (Niklas, Schmiedeler, Prostler, & Schneider, 2011). Through processes of cumulative skill formation (Heckman, 2006) these early skill differences can lead to disadvantageous positions for children in their later lives, e.g., in their educational or occupational careers. One country in which we observe rather high performance discrepancies between children

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with and without an immigration background is Germany (Stanat & Christensen, 2006). Today, about one quarter of all fourth graders in Germany grow up in families with an immigration background (Kristen et al., 2011). Among children under the age of five the share already comprises about a third (Statistisches Bundesamt, 2012). Given this growing number of children from immigrant families in the German society, it is a pressing political and societal task to reduce ethnic educational discrepancies. Proper educational and occupational prospects among all groups of the society are not only essential to guarantee equal opportunities and good chances in the lives of all members of society but are also important on a societal level, e.g., considering the future economic potential of Germany. Thus, to enhance a smooth integration of children from families with an immigration background, it is crucial to examine conditions and activities that are likely to improve their receiving country language proficiency and promote their future life prospects.

Within the family context, engaging parent–child interactions in early childhood, such as reading aloud to children, telling stories, or playing, positively influence children's cognitive and language development (Crosnoe, Leventhal, Wirth, Pierce, & Pianta, 2010; Forget-Dubois et al., 2009; Melhuish et al., 2008; Raviv, Kessenich, & Morrison, 2004; Wood, 2002). In particular, researchers argue that reading aloud to children has a positive impact on their language abilities (Bus, Van Ijzendoorn, & Pellegrini, 1995; Debaryshe, 1995; Duursma, Augustyn, & Zuckerman, 2008; Ermisch, 2008; Evans, Shaw, & Bell, 2000; Leseman & van den Boom, 1999; Rush, 1999; Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994).

However, so far, literature on possible heterogeneous effects of reading aloud among native and immigrant children is scarce. The effectiveness of reading activities for the development of receiving country language skills (that are regularly demanded in the host countries educational systems) might differ between children of native-born parents and children of parents with an immigration background. In immigrant families parents do not necessarily read aloud in the host country's language but also in their mother tongue. Although this is likely to effectively enhance children's native language skills, host country specific language skills will arguably not be enhanced to the same amount (Scheele, Leseman, & Mayo, 2010). Moreover, immigrant parents might have difficulties with receiving country language skills themselves. This in turn can reduce the effectiveness of parent–child reading activities even if parents use the language of the host country when reading to their children. On the other side, reading in the host country's language could be particularly effective in immigrant families compared to native families, especially if children of immigrants lack receiving country language input in their general everyday environments (e.g., due to ethnically segregated neighborhoods or low levels of participation in kindergarten).

By taking the special situation of children of immigrants into account, the current study therefore deals with a rather underexplored issue concerning parent–child reading encounters: the possibility to enhance native and immigrant children's language skills early in life. In our

analyses, we concentrate on Turkish-origin immigrant children in Germany who comprise the largest immigrant group in the country. We assess whether reading aloud frequently can diminish the language discrepancy between Turkish-origin and native German children. A further contribution of our study is that we do not restrict our analysis to the effects of reading aloud. So far, only few literature considers determinants of a high frequency of reading aloud and its effects on children's language abilities simultaneously (for an exception, see Raikes et al., 2006). However, certain family characteristics, such as socioeconomic status or cultural capital, will lead to more frequent parent–child reading activities and will also lead to better language skills of children. Thus, it is crucial to control for these factors when trying to assess the effectiveness of parent–child reading activities.

Our study assesses three major research questions. First we examine various parent and child characteristics to analyze which factors influence a high frequency of reading aloud among native and immigrant families. Second, we concentrate on the effect of parent–child reading activities on children's language skills, in specific their expressive vocabulary. We assess whether there are differential effects among children from native and immigrant families. Finally, we focus on immigrant families in more detail to examine whether the primary family language used in the families and the language skills of the parents affect the efficacy of parent–child reading activities.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Determinants of reading aloud to children

To analyze the likelihood of frequent parent–child reading activities, we take an investment perspective. Becker and Tomes (1986) assume that parents invest in their children's human capital either by monetary investments (e.g., buying books or educational games) or by spending time on engaging parent–child activities (e.g., telling stories) (Aiyagari, Greenwood, & Seshadri, 2002; Conger & Dogan, 2007; Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010; Esping-Andersen & Bonke, 2007; Mistry, Biesanz, Chien, Howes, & Benner, 2008; Yeung, Linver, & Brooks-Gunn, 2002). Within this family investment framework it is further assumed that families with a high socio-economic status (SES) invest more in stimulating parental activities with their children than parents in low SES families. It is argued, that the latter are more concerned with investments in immediate family needs (Conger & Dogan, 2007; Conger et al., 2010).

A number of studies have emphasized parents' socioeconomic status as an important predictor that influences the frequency of parent–child reading activities (Karrass, VanDeventer, & Braungart-Rieker, 2003; Scarborough & Dobrich, 1994; Sonnenschein & Munsterman, 2002). Although, findings on family income are not clear-cut (Karrass et al., 2003; Kitterod, 2002; Yarosz & Barnett, 2001; Zick, Bryant, & Osterbacka, 2001), it is rather well documented, that highly educated parents read more frequently to their children than less educated parents (Craig, 2006; Kitterod, 2002; Yarosz & Barnett, 2001; Yeung, Sandberg, Davis-Kean, & Hofferth, 2001). In addition to the

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