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Experience Corps: Effects on student reading

The Experience Corps (EC) program brings adults aged 55+ into public elementary schools to work with children who are at risk of academic failure. The EC program began in 1995 in five cities and has grown to include 23 sites. Currently, there are nearly 2,000 EC tutors serving approximately 20,000 students. Older adults are recruited to serve in this program and receive training focused on literacy and relationship-building. Each Experience Corps volunteer, or “member,” is assigned as part of a team to a local elementary school participating in the program. At the beginning of the school year, teachers refer low-achieving students to the program; and EC members begin regular tutoring with the children.

Researchers at the Center for Social Development at Washington University’s Brown School were awarded a grant from The Atlantic Philanthropies to evaluate the effects of the EC program on student reading outcomes. Mathematica Policy Research, Inc. (MPR) provided data collection services.

Design of the evaluation

Twenty-three schools in Boston, New York City, and Port Arthur, Texas, participated in the study. A two group, pre-post test design with random assignment was used. At the beginning of the school year, teachers referred all students who needed reading assistance. Students were randomly assigned to the EC program, as there were not enough tutors to serve all of the referred students. Over 1,000 students were referred. Parental consent was obtained on 81% of the referred students, and 883 students were pretested. At posttest, 825 students were reassessed. The EC program tutored 430 of these students, and 451 were in the control group. There were 332 1st, 304 2nd, and 186 3rd graders; 420 males and 402 females in the final dataset.

Analysis of pretest data showed that the EC and control groups were equivalent on all measured characteristics.

Sources of data and measures

Data for the study came from three sources: interviews with the students; assessments completed by teachers; and school records. MPR interviewers assessed reading ability at the beginning and end of the school year in face-to-face interviews with the students. Standardized reading tests were used: the Woodcock Johnson word attack subscale (WJ-WA), the Woodcock Johnson passage comprehension subscale (WJ-PC), and the Peabody Picture Vocabulary test (PPVT-III). At the beginning and end of the academic year, teachers completed standardized assessments of grade-specific reading skills and classroom behavior. At the end of the year, school records were abstracted to ascertain demographics and other student characteristics, and tutors rated the quality of their relationships with the EC students as well as provided their perceptions of student progress.

Students at pre-test

Gender	
Male	451 (51%)
Female	402 (49%)
Race	
African American	473 (58%)
Hispanic Origin	299 (36%)
Others	47 (6%)
Grade	
1 st grade	363 (41%)
2 nd grade	318 (36%)
3 rd grade	200 (23%)
Age	7.09 (1.11)
Free lunch	
Yes	766 (94%)
No	49 (6%)
IEP (Individualized Education Plan)	
Yes	112 (14%)
No	665 (86%)
LEP (Limited English Proficiency)	
Yes	189 (24%)
No	604 (76%)

Findings

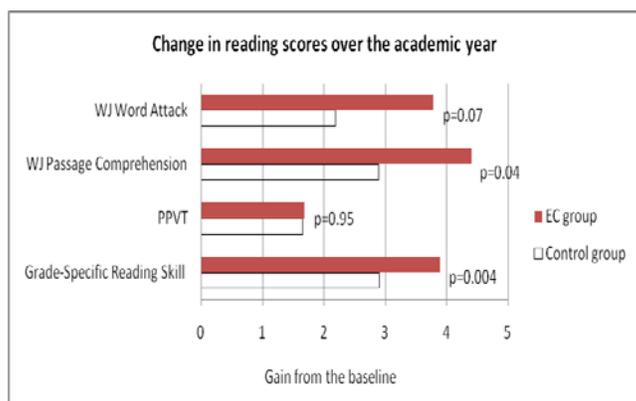
Reading scores

Students referred to the EC program were very poor readers and were clearly in need of assistance. From the scores on the WJ-PC measure, we can conclude that half of the students referred to EC perform as low as or lower than 84% of students their age nationwide, and 12% score worse than 97% of the population.

One-quarter of the students referred to the program have English as their second language. Also, 14% are special education students, as they have IEPs in the student records. These attributes further signal the need for literacy support.

EC students made more gains in reading.

Students in the EC program made statistically greater gain over the academic year on passage comprehension and on assessments of grade-specific reading skills made by the teachers ($p < .05$); and the group difference on word attack was marginally significant ($p < .07$). Gain scores of the experimental and control group are displayed in the following chart.



Effects were largely consistent across subgroups of students.

Program impact was the same no matter what the gender, ethnicity, grade, classroom behavior, or English proficiency of the student. However, it is important to note that special education students, operationalized as those with IEPs in the student record, did not benefit from the program as much as non-special education students in regards to reading comprehension. EC programming with special education students should be reconsidered in light of this finding.

Most EC students received over 35 tutoring sessions.

The EC program succeeded in delivering the intervention to a large number of the students. About half of the EC students received 30 to 49 sessions, and the mean number of sessions was 45. Three-quarters of the students received over 35 sessions, which represents about one session a week throughout the program period.

When including only the EC students who received at least 35 sessions, a criterion that was chosen to indicate that the students received the intervention as intended, the effects were stronger.

Teachers view the program as helpful and as low burden to them.

Teachers overwhelmingly rated the EC program as beneficial to students, while at the same time, they found that it had no or low burden to them. Although these results derived from teachers' overall perception, they are important findings. If teachers do not have positive perceptions of the program and do not feel that it is worth their effort, program effectiveness and sustainability are threatened.

Quality of the tutoring relationship was related to reading outcomes.

Tutors perceived that the EC program had a positive impact on students, and their relationships with students were good. Further, tutor relationship was related to reading outcomes, with better relationships associated with better outcomes.

Summary

These findings indicate that the EC program had statistically significant and substantively important effects on reading outcomes. The effect sizes associated with these gains are .10, .13, and .16—substantial effects given that the intervention is delivered by trained volunteers. Teachers perceived the program as beneficial and low burden to them.

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