

ARE SCHOOLS THE GREAT EQUALIZER IN LOW- AND MIDDLE-INCOME COUNTRIES? INEQUALITIES DURING THE SUMMER MONTHS AND THE SCHOOL YEAR

PRESENTED BY
XIMEIRA RAMIREZ VILLANUEVA, JOINT HONOURS IN SOCIOLOGY AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT STUDIES AND DR. LUCA MARIA PESANDO, DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY



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ABSTRACT

The questions of whether schools are a great equalizer and can compensate for socio-economic inequalities at birth is perhaps one of the longest lasting in the sociology of education literature. Some scholars argue that schooling plays an important role in reproducing and even exacerbating existing disparities. Other scholars claim instead that, despite differences in resources across schools, schools serve to reduce disparities in skills between advantaged and disadvantaged students.

Although seemingly incompatible, both lines of argument may be correct if variation in school environments is smaller than variation in non-school environments. A simple way to assess this claim would be to obtain seasonal estimates, i.e. to compare to socioeconomic gaps in skills when school is not in effect, for instance during the summer months, where non-school factors such as family and neighbourhood play a key role.

Previous research that has adopted this approach has found that students learn at much more equal rates when school is in session than when it is not, suggesting that schools might serve an equalizing role. However, this research is mainly from high-income societies. This project seeks to investigate an analogous research question in low-income societies. This is indeed more complex -- although not any less relevant sociologically -- due to lower attendance rates in resource-deprived contexts and less availability of longitudinal data following children and measuring their skills as they move from one grade to the next. These data are essential as they allow us to estimate learning rates when school is in session and when it is not, thus shedding light on whether schools actually increase inequality or not.



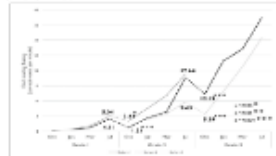
LITERATURE REVIEW

Findings from existing studies on high-income societies

In high income countries, summer learning losses are well attested to by research in a variety of countries, including the United States, Canada, Sweden, and Belgium. While certain studies bring into question the significance, or even existence, of losses among higher-income students, they universally point towards computational mathematics as the most vulnerable skill and generally indicate significant setbacks among lower-income students which are reversible by means of summer learning programs, at least in terms of various reading proficiencies

Findings from existing studies on low-income societies

To our knowledge, there is not significant research on grade-transition losses in low-income countries other than Slade et al.'s research in Malawi. Slade's study effectively shows that, similarly to high-income countries, grade-transition loss exists in low-income countries such as Malawi. This can be seen in the following graph which illustrates oral reading fluency in Chichewa, by student cohort and assessment time:



Slade, Timothy S., Benjamin Pifer, Zikari Kusanda, Simon King, and Hlhatla Beahin. 2017. "Is 'Summer' Reading Loss Universal? Using Ongoing Literacy Assessment in Malawi to Estimate the Loss from Grade-Transition Breaks." *Research in Comparative and International Education* 12(4):441-65.



WHY ARE OUR FINDINGS IMPORTANT?

The fact that summer learning losses are not equally distributed among socioeconomic groups is a key area of concern for development policy as "education enables upward socioeconomic mobility and is a key to escaping poverty" per the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Although the target of the SDGs is the quality of education rather than educational inequality, summer learning losses are critical in achieving the former. Indeed if the quality of education can vary amongst socioeconomic status, this could mean that some children are getting an education that is deemed "good" whilst other children of the same community would be getting an education that is deemed as "poor". This could be critical in terms of growing income gaps.



Furthermore, according to the National Dropout Prevention Center, getting poor grades at school is a major determinant in school dropouts. This would mean that if summer learning losses are unequally distributed, more low-income students would be at risk of getting poor grades, and in turn more likely of dropping out of school than high-income students.

Summer learning losses could be diminished or prevented through large scale interventions from policymakers. It is therefore of great interest to further the literature that has been published on summer learning losses for the study of educational inequalities



METHODOLOGY

I identified data sources providing longitudinal information on children's skills across school grades.

- The datasets that we worked with:
- Learning and Educational Achievement in Punjab Schools (LEAPS)
 - The Malawi LAT sampling frame
 - USAID/Zambia Education Data Activity



FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Unfortunately, due to time constraints, Dr. Pesando and I were not able to conclude our research.

However, we will continue to work on this paper. Our next step is to clean our data and have them ready for statistical analyses.



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