

Read-Alouds are Good for Literacy Development: A Comment on Freakonomics

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Freakonomics, by Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner, is a very good book, but it contains a mistake, one that can cause a lot of harm. The *Freakonomics* authors claim that parents' reading aloud to their children does not predict the children's academic achievement.

This statement is based on data reported in a journal paper by Levitt and another colleague, Roland Fryer (Fryer and Levitt, 2004), an analysis of data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study. Levitt and Dubner concluded that frequency of being read to by parents was not a statistically significant predictor of scores on tests given to kindergarten students when they began school.

There is, however, a good reason why Levitt and Fryer got these results: Nearly all parents in the sample said they read to their children quite a bit. On a scale of 1 to 4, where 1 = read to "not at all" and 4 = read to "every day," parents of black children reported an average of 3, and parents of white children reported at average of 3.4. This produces a ceiling effect, with scores bunched near the top.

With data like this it is impossible to determine if those read to more did better than those read to less because so many children in their sample were read to a lot. (Of course, with self-reported data it is hard to be sure how much reading aloud really took place.)

Thus, Levitt and Fryer's study cannot give us any useful information about the relationship between reading aloud and school success. It does tell us, however, that read-alouds are now very popular among parents and/or parents feel it is something they should be doing. This could be due to the efforts of writers like Jim Trelease, whose book, *The Read-Aloud Handbook* (Penguin, fifth edition, 2001), has sold over two million copies since it first appeared over 20 years ago.

Freakonomics does not cite the considerable amount of research that shows that read-alouds do help, studies that do not suffer from the same methodological problem that Levitt and Fryer's study does.

The research in this area consists both of correlational studies of the kind Levitt and Fryer did, studies that control for the effects of poverty, as Levitt and Fryer did, as well as experiments, in which one group of children is read to considerably more than another. Read-alouds have been a consistent winner in this research. Reviews of the research using a sophisticated statistical procedure for reviewing large numbers of studies (meta-analysis) include a 1999 article by Blok in *Language Learning* and a 1995 article by Bus, Van Ijzendoorn, and Pellegrini in the *Review of Educational Research*.

Freakonomics has many virtues. This error, however, is serious, dismissing a practice that both readers and children enjoy and that has a powerful and positive influence on literacy development.