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Performance of Economically Disadvantaged Students and English Language Learners in End of Grade Tests in Reading: The Need for More Resources and Teaching Quality

By

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Abstract: - Education is a vehicle for social change. It has been linked to all types of development. According to Trinh (2023), education and training "are not only prerequisites for economic development, but they also contribute to sociopolitical stability and…. to raising the human development index". The study set out to investigate (a) What is the difference in performance for students in two subgroups – Economically Disadvantaged and English Language Learners in Reading in the middle grade level and for students who are not Economically Disadvantaged and non-English Language Learners for each of the years of the study- 2022-2024? (b). What is the difference in performance for students who are Economically Disadvantaged in Reading in the middle grade level when compared to the overall percentage average for all students for each of the three years and for all the middle grade levels? (c). What is the percentage difference in performance for English Language Learners compared to All students for each of th3e grade levels and the years? It was found that for the three years of the study, economically disadvantaged students consistently performed lower than non-Economically disadvantaged students. Also, English Language learners performed lower than non-English Language learners. Overall, English language learners performed the lowest for all the subgroups in the study. Two strategies related to resources and funding and teacher quality were discussed as means of improving student achievement for the two subgroups.

Keywords: Achievement gap, Economically Disadvantaged students, End of Grade Tests, English Language learners, Reading.

Performance of Economically Disadvantaged Students and English Language learners in End of Grade Tests in Reading: The Need for More Resources and Teaching Quality

Introduction

Education is a vehicle for social change. It has been linked to all types of development. According to Trinh (2023), education and training "are not only prerequisites for economic development, but they also contribute to sociopolitical stability and…. to raising the human development index". (p. 125). Guterres, the UN Secretary General declared that "Education is the key to personal development and the future of societies. It unlocks opportunities and narrows inequalities. It is the bedrock of informed, tolerant societies, and a primary driver of sustainable development. (2020). Quality education becomes a gateway to ensuring social justice and allowing all individuals to engage in productive work and have a voice in the society they live in.

Given the importance of K-12 education to national and personal development, many societies expend a lot of resources in the education of students at these grade levels. National policies on education are in part geared to educating the young to be productive members of society. .In the U.S., the goals of the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) included raising academic standards for all students, measuring student academic achievement and holding schools accountable for the academic progress of students. States were to establish challenging standards and develop assessments aligned with these standards. These yearly assessments were mostly in reading and mathematics and schools that failed to meet the goals of adequate yearly progress were subject to sanctions. The Every Child Succeeds Act (2015) which replaced the No Child Left Behind Act has a major goal of providing "all children significant opportunity to receive a fair, equitable, and high-quality education, and to close educational achievement gaps." (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015) The Act also indicated that states "administer student assessments in reading, mathematics, and science, according to an established testing schedule. A state may administer either a single assessment or multiple assessments that result in a single, summative score...)" and that states establish long-term goals for all students and individual subgroups based on: (1) academic achievement as measured by proficiency on required state assessments, and (2) graduation rates." For all subgroups, "goals must account for the level of improvement necessary to make significant progress in closing statewide gaps in proficiency and graduation rates. With respect to English learners, a state shall establish goals for increasing the percentage of students achieving English language proficiency within a timeframe determined by the state." (Congress.Gov, 2015-2016)

North Carolina assessment of student and school progress are reported via the North Carolina Schools Report Cards. The Schools Report Card has several information including Historical School Performance Grades, Student performance on End-of-Grade and End-of-Course tests, English Learner progress indicator and participation rate reporting. Data also is provided on achievement in Reading/English Language, Mathematics and Science for subgroups in accordance with Every Student Succeeds Act. All public-school students in grades 3 to 12 are supposed to be tested and their performance used to determine school performance and grade.

The purpose of this study was to find out the following-

a. What is the difference in performance for students in two subgroups – Economically Disadvantaged and English Language Learners in Reading in the middle grade level when compared to students who are non-Economically Disadvantaged and non-English Language Learners for each of the years of the study- 2022-2024?
b. What is the difference in performance for students who are Economically Disadvantaged in Reading in the middle grade level when compared to the overall percentage average for all students for each of the three years and for all the middle grade levels?
c. What is the percentage difference in performance for English Language Learners compared to All students for each of the grade levels and the years?

d. What are some of the recommendations to help close the achievement gaps, if any?

Literature review

In Leandro versus the State of North Carolina, the North Carolina Supreme Court in 1997 affirmed "every child's state constitutional right to a sound, basic education beginning in early childhood (WesrEd, 2019),. For the Court a sound basic education provided children and youth with all the opportunities necessary to become an adult possessing "Sufficient ability to read, write and speak the English language and a sufficient knowledge of fundamental mathematics and physical science to enable the student to function in a complex and rapidly changing society;" (Duke Law Children's Law Clinic Resources). According to WestEd, the state of Noth Carolina will need to strategically improve and transform multiple components of the education system including "effectively addressing the needs of at-risk students and the persistent gaps in achievement among groups of students. A deep ongoing commitment and wise investments are vital to building and maintaining the required capacity at the school, district, regional, and state levels. The future of the state hangs in the balance." (p. 1)

2.1. Economically Disadvantaged and Student Performance

Several studies (Coleman, 1966; Agasisti et al, 2021., Etim, Etim and Blizzard, 2023) show strong correlation between socio-economic strata and student performance. Hanushek, Peterson, Talpey and Woesmann (2019) in their study concluded that "gaps in achievement between low and high SES groups are mostly unchanged over the past half century. Second, while gains in the level of achievement are steady and significant at the 8th grade level, they have not translated into gains at the end of high school." (p.19). In the same manner, an Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development study (2012) reported that "Students from low socio-economic background are twice as likely to be low performers, implying that personal or social circumstances are obstacles to achieving their educational potential" (p. 9). On the other hand, Yan and Gai (2022) concluded that for students from low SES, "higher academic expectations increase the likelihood that students will become resilient students" (p.8).

2.2 School SES and Student Performance.

Research shows that the overall SES of a school determines student performance. According to Perry and McConney (2010), "All students—regardless of their personal/family SES—benefit strongly and relatively equally from schooling contexts in which the SES of the school group is high. Conversely, all students, regardless of their individual SES, perform considerably less well on measures of academic achievement in school contexts characterized, in the aggregate, as low on the school SES continuum" (pp1157-1158). Ewijik and Sleegers (2010) in their literature review showed that the difference in performance based on school / class SES may be as a result of several factors- : average SES may affect the disciplinary climate or atmosphere in a class, the teacher may adjust her style of teaching to the type of students in the class, high-SES schools may benefit from greater support from parents , while peer pressure and peer competition may stimulate students to work harder. (pp. 151) Perry, , Saatcioglu, and Mickelson.(2022)concluded that "irrespective of their performance quintile, all Australian students' mathematics, reading, and science achievement scores are signifcantly and similarly related to the mean SES of the school they attend.". and that school-level SES efect is greater when the student's SES is higher. (p.12). Thus, school SES is predictive of student academic performance (p. 24).

OECD (2012) reported that "Low performing disadvantaged schools often lack the internal capacity or support to improve, as school leaders and teachers and the environments of schools, classrooms and neighbourhoods frequently fail to offer a quality learning experience for the most disadvantaged." (p. 3). OECD then recommended the following to improve schools- recruiting and retaining high quality teachers, ensure effective classroom learning strategies and linking schools with parents and communities.

2.3 English Language learners and Achievement

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2024), the percentage of English Language Learners in schools in the United States grew from 9.4 percent in 2011 to 10.6 percent in 2021. The states with the highest percentage growth included Texas, California and New Mexico. Freeman, Freeman and Mercuri (2003) pointed out that many of the English Language Learners come to school unprepared and struggle in school. "Many of them live in households and neighborhoods with high and sustained poverty, attend schools with other poor children, and are members of families that are likely to move from one school or district to another at least once during the school year." (p.111). Lofgran (2021) indicated that the "most significant contributors to educational disparities amongst the nation's racial and ethnic minorities include poverty, segregation and racial school districting, inadequate language resources for English language learners" and that the continued educational disparities leads to continued poverty and decreased college enrolment and performance. Freeman, Freeman and Mercuri (2003) then suggest strategies to help all English Language learners including "organizing curriculum around relevant themes, building on students' background knowledge and experiences" (p. 121) In an analysis of NAEP scores, Murphy (2014) stated that " The achievement gap between ELL and non-ELL students—about 40 percentage points in both fourth-grade reading and eighth-grade math—has been essentially unchanged from 2000 to 2013. However, the achievement of former ELL students shows greater progress. "(p.2). Montgomery and Drier (2019) of the

North Carolina Justice Center indicated that a major cause of the poor performance of English Language Learners is finance. They concluded thus-

In guaranteeing a sound, basic education for all children, the state must adequately fund the LEP allotment to meet the needs of a growing and linguistically diverse student population. The arbitrary cap must be lifted, and the funding formula itself be evaluated. Additionally, the LEP allotment could be a strategic tool in addressing the state's teacher diversity problem by allowing districts to provide salary supplements to attract and retain bilingual teachers.

2.4 : Teacher Effectiveness

Several studies show that to improve student performance, there has to be an effective teacher (Hanushek, Peterson, Talpey and Woessmann (2019, p.20). Lee (2018) found out that "students who had been taught by a succession of high-performing and qualified teachers tend to have a positive relationship with students' short- and long-term educational success." (p.359). According to Stronge, Ward, Tucker, *et al.* (2007), effective teachers "tended to ask a greater number of higher level (e.g., analysis) questions and had fewer incidences of off-task behavior than ineffective teachers." (p.165.) Siagian and Artha (2023) concluded that "Teacher quality was found to be a significant predictor of school quality. This suggests that teachers who have the knowledge, skills, and competencies necessary to teach students effectively are more likely to contribute to the overall quality of the school." (p.190)

In many low performing schools, many of the teachers are not highly qualified as defined by the state standards they are working. Kessler (2024) pointed this out when he declared that "many "low-performing" schools now rely on teachers from foreign countries or long-term substitute teachers to cover classes because no one else will teach there. Of course, this dynamic of repelling high-performing teachers from schools most in need only further guarantees future poor performance."

Method of Investigation

Secondary data was used in this study. Data was from the 2024 North Carolina School Report Cards. As a result of Every School Succeeds Act, states produce, among other things, report cards for each public school in the respective state. The North Carolina Schools Report Card provides information on Historical School Performance Grades, Student performance on End-of-Grade and End-of-Course tests, English Learner progress indicator and Participation rate reporting etc. (N.C. Department of Public Instruction., 2024). Data is provided for each school district, each public school in the district and overall performance at state level. Composite data for the State was used in the analysis. Student performance is divided into five levels- Levels 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5. Students in Levels 1 and 2 are deemed not proficient while students in Levels 3- 5 are proficient at varying levels. For example, students in Level 5 demonstrate comprehensive understanding of the content for that grade level and are ready for the advanced content of the next grade. For this study, data was for the percentage of students scoring Levels 3-5. Data was disaggregated for the groups in the study- comparing performance of Economically disadvantaged and non-Economically Disadvantaged and English language Learners and non-English Language Learners. The Analysis section below provided information on each of the questions posed in the purpose of study section.

Analysis

Question 1- What is the difference in performance for students for the two subgroups – Economically Disadvantaged and English Language learners in Reading in the middle grade level when compared to students who non-Economically Disadvantaged and non-English Language learners for each of the years of the study- 2022-2024 are

Table 1: Comparing the Performance of the subgroups in Level 3-5 in Reading at Grade 6, 2021-2022 to 2023-2024

Student Groups	2021-2022 (in %)	2022-2023 (in %)	2023-2024 (in %)
All students	47.5	49.2	49.4
Economically Disadvantaged	31.5	35,0	35.9
Not Economically Disadvantaged	58.2	65.1	65.5
English Language Learners	10.3	12.3	11.3
Not English Language Learners	51.2	53.1	53.7

Source: NCDPI (2024) 2023-2024 Performance and Growth of North Carolina Public Schools-Annual Testing Report September 4, 2024.

Table 1: above showed that for all subgroups, performance improved for the three years in the study except for English Language Learners. However, the overall performance for All Students was lower than the performance of students that were non- Economically disadvantaged. Overall, the performance of English Language Learners was the lowest among all the groups in the study. A further analysis is provided in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Difference in Performance for Non economically Disadvantaged versus Economically Disadvantaged and English Language Learners vs Non-English Language Learners for Grade 6 in Reading 2022-2024,

	Difference between non- economically disadvantaged and economically disadvantaged in performance (in %).	Difference between non-English language learners and English Language learners in performance (in %)
2021-2022	26.7	40.8
2022-2023	30.1	40.8
2023-2024	29.6	42.4

Table 2 above showed that the difference for performance between non-English language learners and English language Learners was very high, a difference of more than 40 percent for each of the three years. There was no improvement during the three years of the study, 2022 to 2024. The difference in performance between Non economically disadvantaged and economically disadvantaged was also high, but not as high as the difference between non-English language learners and English language Learners.

Table 3: Comparing the Performance of the subgroups in Level 3-5 in Reading at Grade 7, 2021-2022 to 2023-2024

Student Groups	2021-2022 (in %)	2022-2023 (in %)	2023-2024 (in %)
All students	48.8	50.1	48.3
Economically Disadvantaged	32.6	36.0	34.6
Not Economically Disadvantaged	59.2	65.4	62.2
English Language Learners	10.0	12.5	11.7
Not English Language Learners	52.4	54.1	52.7

Source: NCDPI (2024) 2023-2024 Performance and Growth of North Carolina Public Schools-Annual Testing Report September 4, 2024.

In Table 3 above, performance for All students increased during 2022-2023 school year but dropped in 2023-2024. Just like in Table 1 above, student performance in Grade 7 was highest for Not Economically Disadvantaged students when compared to Economically Disadvantaged students and English Language Learners,

Table 4: Difference in Performance for Non-Economically Disadvantaged versus Economically Disadvantaged and English Language Learners vs non- English Language Learners for Grade 7 in Reading 2022-2024,

	Difference between non- economically disadvantaged and economically disadvantaged in performance (in %).	Difference between non-English language learners and English Language learners in performance (in %)
2021-2022	26.6	42.4
2022-2023	29.4	41.6
2023-2024	27.6	41.0

At the Grade 7 level, Table 4 above showed that the difference in performance for non-Economically Disadvantaged and Economically Disadvantaged students was between 26.6 and 29.4 percent for the three years of the study. of the study. When comparing non-English Language Learners and English Language Learners, the difference was between 41 percent and 42 percent for each of the three years.

Table 5: Comparing the Performance of the subgroups in Level 3-5 in Reading at Grade 8, 2021-2022 to 2023-2024

Student Groups	2021-2022 (in %)	2022-2023 (in %)	2023-2024 (in %)
All students	50.6	50.9	51.3
Economically Disadvantaged	34.6	36.8	37.6
Not Economically Disadvantaged	60.2	65.9	65.1
English Language Learners	12.5	11.5	12.6
Not English Language Learners	54.3	54.9	55.9

Source: NCDPI (2024) 2023-2024 Performance and Growth of North Carolina Public Schools-Annual Testing Report September 4, 2024.

At the Grade 8 level, Table 5 showed that students who were not Economically Disadvantaged outperformed all the other subgroups- All students, Economically Disadvantaged and non-English Language Learners in reading for each of the three years. Table 5 above also showed that Economically Disadvantaged and English language Learners performed poorly in Reading at the 8th Grade level when compared to All Students.

Table 6: Difference in Performance for Non-Economically Disadvantaged versus Economically Disadvantaged and English Language Learners vs Non-English Language Learners for Grade 8 in Reading 2022-2024, (Numbers in percentages)

	Difference between non- economically disadvantaged and economically disadvantaged in performance (in %).	Difference between non-English language learners and English Language learners in performance (in %)
2021-2022	25.6	41.8
2022-2023	29.1	43.4
2023-2024	27.5	43.3

Question 2: What is the difference in performance for students who Economically Disadvantaged in Reading in the middle grade level are when compared to the overall percentage average for all students for each of the three years and for all the middle grade levels.

Table 7: Difference in performance for Economically Disadvantaged compared to All Students and Non-Economically Disadvantaged Compared to All Students by Year and Grade Level.

Subgroup	Grade Level	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
Economically Disadvantaged versus All Students	6	16.0 percent of economically disadvantaged students performed at lower level than the percentage for All students	14.2 percent of the economically disadvantaged students performed at a lower level than the percentage for All students	14.4 percent of the economically disadvantaged students performed at a lower level that the percentage of All the students
Non-Economically Disadvantaged versus All Students		10.7 percent of non-economically disadvantaged students performed at a higher level than the percentage for All students	15.9 percent of non-economically disadvantaged students performed at a higher level than the percentage for All students	16.1 percent of economically disadvantaged students performed at lower level than the percentage for All students
Economically Disadvantaged versus All Students	7	16.2 percent of economically disadvantaged students performed at lower level than the percentage for All students	14.1 percent of the economically disadvantaged students performed at a lower level than the percentage for All students	7.7 percent of the economically disadvantaged students performed at a lower level that the percentage of All the students
Non-Economically Disadvantaged versus All Students		10.4 percent of non-economically disadvantaged students performed at a higher level than the percentage for All students	15.3 percent of non-economically disadvantaged students performed at a higher level than the percentage for All students	13.9 percent of economically disadvantaged students performed at lower level than the percentage for All students
Economically Disadvantaged versus All Students	8	16.0 percent of economically disadvantaged students performed at lower level than the percentage for All students	14.1 percent of economically disadvantaged students performed at lower level than the percentage for All students	13.7 percent of economically disadvantaged students performed at lower level than the percentage for All students
Non-Economically Disadvantaged versus All Students		9.6 percent of non-economically disadvantaged students performed at a higher level than the percentage for All students	15.0 percent of non-economically disadvantaged students performed at a higher level than the percentage for All students	13.8 percent of non-economically disadvantaged students performed at a higher level than the percentage for All students

Table 7 above showed that a higher percentage of non-economically disadvantaged students performed higher than ALL Students while economically disadvantaged students performed at a lower level than the percentage of All students.

Question 3: What is the percentage difference in performance for English Language Learners compared to All students for each of th3e grade levels and the years?

Table 8: The percentage difference in performance when comparing All Students and English Language Learners for each of the grade levels and the years 2021-2022 and 2023-2024. (Numbers in percentages)

Groups	Grade level	2021-2022	2022-2023	2023-2024
All Students	6	47.5	49.2	49.4
English L. Learners		10.3	12.3	11.3
Difference (in %)		37.2	36.9	38.1
All Students	7	48.8	50.1	48.3
English L. Learners		10.0	12.5	11.7
Difference (in %)		38.8	37.6	36.6
All Students	8	50.6	50.9	51.3
English L. Learners		12.5	11.5	12.6
Difference (in %)		38.1	39.4	38.7

Table 8 shows that consistently for all the years and for all the grades, the percentage of English Language Learners scoring Levels 3-5 was less than 15 percent when compared to All Students. The percentage difference ranged from 36.9 percent to 39.4 percent.

Findings

The findings in this study include the following-

- Students who were non- Economically Disadvantaged outperformed all the other subgroups- All students, Economically Disadvantaged, English Language Learners and non-English Language Learners in Reading for each of the three years.
- A higher percentage of non-Economically Disadvantaged students performed higher than ALL Students while Economically Disadvantaged students performed at a lower level than the percentage of All students.
- The percentage of Economically disadvantaged and English Language learners who performed at Levels 3-5 was consistently lower in all grade levels and for all the years of the study when compared to non-Economically disadvantaged and Non-English language learners
- At the 6th Grade level, 10.7 percent of non-Economically Disadvantaged students performed at a higher level than the percentage for All students in Reading
- Overall, the performance of English Language Learners was the lowest among all the sub-groups in the study in Reading.

Discussion and Recommendation

The study set out to investigate (a) What is the difference in performance for students in two subgroups – Economically Disadvantaged and English Language Learners in Reading in the middle grade level and for students who are not Economically Disadvantaged and non-English Language Learners for each of the years of the study- 2022-2024? (b). What is the difference in performance for students who are Economically Disadvantaged in Reading in the middle grade level when compared to the overall percentage average for all students for each of the three years and for all the middle grade levels? (c). What is the percentage difference in performance for English Language Learners compared to All students for each of th3e grade levels and the years?

The percentage of Economically disadvantaged and English Language learners who performed at Levels 3-5 was consistently lower in all grade levels and for all the years of the study when compared to non-Economically disadvantaged and non-English language learners... Overall, the performance of English Language Learners was the lowest among all the groups in the study. In regard to economically disadvantaged students, this study further supports earlier studies (Etim, Etim, Blizzard, 2023 and Hanushek, Peterson, Talpey and Woesmann (2019) With regards to English language Learners, this study is in line with the findings of Murphy (2014). For both groups, there is the need to improve instruction. States need to develop policies around funding/ resources and teacher quality in order to improve the performance of these two subgroups of students.

a. Resources and funding- Resources and funding are needed to allow for after school instruction, tutoring and Saturday school .According to Grigoroiu, Tescașiu, Constantin, Țurcanu, Tecău, (2024) "Some studies show that increasing the time for learning and doing homework after school, as well as other extracurricular educational activities, can support the development of cognitive skills and can improve the students' academic performance" (p. 3). In a study in Georgia, a state not too far from North Carolina, Owens (2020) in advocating for more resources for English language Learner's students pointed out that "Any argument that ELs are not receiving the resources they need to have equal opportunities would be backed up by history, current litigation and student test scores." (p.7)

b. Teacher Quality-one measure of effective teaching is that effective teachers produce high achieving students. According to Kimi and Podolsky (2016), "As teachers gain experience, their students not only learn more, as measured by standardized tests, they are also more likely to do better on other measures of success, such as school attendance" (p1). Many low-income students and marginalized populations are often served by less qualified teachers with fewer

resources (Commonwealth Institute, 2017). The need to continue to train high quality teachers for every classroom and teachers trained in teaching English language Learners need to continue especially given that the number and percentage of English language learners will continue to grow in the school systems nationwide.

Conclusion

Two subgroups are not performing as high as the other subgroups- Economically disadvantaged and English Language Learners, Education for most is the gateway to reducing poverty, improving health and the primary driver for sustainable development. Post Covid 19, strategies need to continue to be developed and implemented to allow for more successful students.

Limitations: Data for the study was limited to North Carolina for the years 2021-2022 and 2023-2024.

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