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#237 - Catch-Up Learning: Supporting students experiencing disadvantage through online tutoring at home

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Objectives/aims

In response to the anticipated impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on students experiencing disadvantage, in 2020-21 The Smith Family developed, implemented and evaluated a small pilot of a new online tutoring program *Catch-Up Learning*. It was informed by the available international evidence and introduced the innovation of an in-home model. The evaluation found promising evidence of the program's capacity to support greater than expected gains in literacy and numeracy. A larger second trial was undertaken in 2022, with funding from the Australian Government. The evaluation of the second trial aimed to:

- Describe who participated and at what frequency
- Assess the extent to which participants' literacy and numeracy skills improved
- Assess the program's impact on students' confidence, engagement and learning disposition
- Identify program enablers and challenges.

Methods

The evaluation involved mixed methods data collection, including:

- Participants' program attendance rates
- Pre and post-program adaptive Progressive Achievement Tests (PAT) in maths and reading, (developed by the Australian Council for Education Research), for participating students and a "reference group" of students who completed PATs six-months apart, as the *Catch-Up Learning* participants did.
- Range of demographic and educational student data

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- Tutor survey on experiences of the program
- Interviews with parent/carers and tutors of participating students.

Main findings

The second trial of the program showed it can be implemented at a larger scale while still achieving positive results.

Program completion was high (83%), as was average program attendance (86%). Importantly, attendance did not vary significantly by gender, Indigeneity, health, Year level, location, or pre-program skills.

Pre-program assessments confirmed that participating students were behind their peers in numeracy and literacy. At the end of the program:

- 67 percent had made greater progress in numeracy than might typically be expected in six-months (based on comparable students in the reference group).
- 53 percent made greater than expected progress in literacy.
- 44 percent made greater than expected progress in both numeracy and literacy.
- Students with lower pre-program skill levels were more likely to make greater progress than expected, suggesting particular benefit to students furthest behind.

The evaluation demonstrated that *Catch-Up Learning* also contributes to increased student:

- Confidence
- Commitment to and love of learning
- Perseverance
- Adoption of learning strategies that can contribute to their continued academic improvement.

Program enablers included:

- Qualified and experienced teachers matched to students, providing one-on-one tailored sessions.
- Online tutoring in the home, allowing parents to support their child's participation, celebrate progress, and reinforce the value of learning.

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- Strong relationships between tutors, students and parents/carers, facilitating a two-way sharing of knowledge between parents/carers and tutors and parents/carers better understanding their child's learning needs, picking up tips and strategies from tutors.
- Aligning learning activities with students' interests.

As in the first pilot, technology remained a challenge, contributing to a reduction in program attendance for some students and to some withdrawing from the program.

Feedback from a small number of tutors and a parent/carer indicated the intensity and timing of the program was a challenge for some students and families, though program attendance rates did not vary by student characteristics. A more flexible approach to the length and number of sessions each week may be suitable for some students, particularly those with a health or disability issue.

The Grattan Institute's *Tackling under-achievement* report (2023) on tutoring identified that 'the only Australian-based evaluations which have published the impact on student results are the 2021 and 2022 Smith Family pilots...show[ing] greater than expected gains'. Given long-standing gaps in educational achievement for students experiencing disadvantage and the positive findings of the evaluations, this program can play a role in students "catching-up", giving them a better chance of more positive long-term outcomes.