

THE IMPORTANCE OF SUMMER READING: Public Library Summer Reading Programs and Learning

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In a 2009 government web cast, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan described summer learning loss as “devastating.” This is what researchers have often referred to as the “summer slide.” It is estimated that school summer breaks will cause the average student to lose up to one month of instruction, with disadvantaged students being disproportionately affected (Cooper, 1996). Researchers conclude that two-thirds of the 9th grade reading achievement gap can be explained by unequal access to summer learning opportunities during the elementary school years, with nearly one-third of the gap present when children begin school (Alexander, Entwistle & Olsen, 2007). The body of existing research demonstrates the critical importance that the early development of summer reading habits can play in providing the foundation for later success. Summer learning research can be broadly categorized under the following themes:

1. The impact of summer learning loss on disadvantaged youth
2. Access to books and time devoted to reading
3. The importance of successful reading experiences
4. The impact of innovative summer reading programs

This synopsis of research on summer reading and learning provides a brief overview of these themes. A bibliography is attached.



The Impact of Summer Learning Loss on Disadvantaged Youth

An in-depth study of Baltimore area students, Alexander et al. (2007), concluded that students from both better-off and disadvantaged backgrounds made similar achievement gains during the school year. However, during the summer the disadvantaged youth fell significantly behind in reading. This finding validates the importance of education but also indicates the disparities evident between students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Dr. Beth Miller (2007) posits, "Other factors, nearly all of them related to the opportunities and experiences children have outside of the school, in the community and their families, result in gaps in achievement scores." Preeminent reading and education researchers, Anne E. Cunningham and Keith E. Stanovich (1998), note the "Matthew effects," in academic achievement; a reference to the Biblical passage of the rich-get-richer and the poor-get-poorer phenomenon. Differences in out-of-school access to books, positive reading practices, and connections with institutions supportive of self-discovery and reading, account for much of the disparity in student academic success. This has a cascading effect as children grow and develop.

Access to Books

According to Mc-Gill Franzen and Allington (2004), "Too many children spend their summer with no books to read." Their research cites the necessity of finding novel ways to get books into the hands of children during summer breaks. This idea is supported by research from Barbara Heyn (1978), who found that reading was the most influential factor related to summer learning. Further studies by Krashen (2004) simply state, "More access to books results in more reading." These and other studies find that when schools close their doors, the opportunity to read is often closed with them, especially for those children without access to books.

More access to books results in more reading

McQuillan (1998) found that, "There is now considerable evidence that the amount and quality of student's access to reading materials is substantively related to the amount of reading they engage in, which in turn is the most important determinant of reading achievement." The studies show that students' who read more, read better; they also write better, spell better, have larger vocabularies, and have better control of complex grammatical constructions (Krashen, 2009).

The Importance of Successful Reading Experiences

In their studies of children's reading development, McGill-Franzen and Allington (2003), cite the importance of extensive, successful reading experiences in the development of reading proficiency. If children have the opportunity to listen to, discuss, and read books on topics that they select, they will develop extensive background information which can serve as a platform from which to engage in their own independent reading. Additional studies by Guthrie and Anderson (1999), found that "A history of less-successful reading experiences produces a lessened interest in voluntary reading than a history of successful reading experiences." According to Cunningham and Stanovich (1998), the key predictors of positive reading development are success when learning to read and numerous opportunities and experiences with reading. Children who enjoy reading will read more and become proficient at the same time. A report from the National Institute of Education (1988) concluded that, "...the amount of reading done out of school is consistently related to gains in reading achievement."

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The Impact of Innovative Summer Reading Programs

Public library summer reading programs are one solution to the “summer slide.” In an analysis of summer learning programs by Miller (2007), it was found that children can benefit from “hybrid” programs which combine elements of youth development principles with academic enrichment. Summer reading programs in libraries exemplify this kind of hybrid program. Barbara Heyn (1978) found that “More than any other public institution, including the schools, the public library contributed to the intellectual growth of children during the summer.” Drs. Celano and Neumann (2001), in a study prepared for the Pennsylvania Library Association, monitored differences between children participating in public library summer reading programs and those involved in local recreational summer programs. They concluded that, in addition to literacy related activities, children in library programs benefited academically from story hours, arts and crafts, and

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other special events designed to enhance the reading experience.

Current research points out that increased summer reading reduces summer learning loss. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, has stated “A key step toward stopping the summer slide, is the development and launch of high quality programs that take advantage of time outside the school day and year to help children learn, grow, and develop” (Elling, 2009).

Summer Reading at New York Libraries

Summer Reading at New York Libraries is an annual program that brings children and families into local public libraries for reading and activities. Over 1.5 million of New York’s children and teens participated in the State Library-sponsored program in 2008 and 2009. Some 1,100 local libraries throughout New York State offer a summer reading program geared towards the needs of children in their communities. Public libraries partner with school and local organizations to help promote and create the program. Children are encouraged to discuss, write about, and report on the books they read. Library staff help children select reading materials and provide literacy-enhancing programs such as storytelling, music, creative arts, and performances.



“...we should provide all children, regardless of their achievement levels, with as many reading experiences as possible. Indeed, this becomes doubly imperative for precisely those children whose verbal abilities are most in need of bolstering, for it is the very act of reading that can build these capabilities...we often despair of changing our students’ abilities, but there is one partially malleable habit that will itself develop abilities – reading!”

-Anne E. Cunningham and Keith E. Stanovich (1998)

Annotated Bibliography

Alexander, K., Entwistle D., & Olsen L (2007). "Lasting Consequences of the Summer Learning Gap." *American Sociological Review*. no. 72, 167-180.

Researchers from John Hopkins University used data from the Baltimore Beginning School Study to examine the long-term educational consequences of summer learning differences by family socio-economic level. The authors examine achievement scores to trace their development from 9th grade back to first grade. The study concluded that the achievement gap between high-low socioeconomic statuses is mainly traced to differential summer learning over the elementary school years. The consequence of this achievement gap substantially accounts for major differences in high school completion and four year college attendance.

Anderson, R. C., Hiebert E. H., Scott J. A., & Wilkinson I. A. G. (1985). *Becoming a Nation of Readers: The Report of the Commission on Reading*. Washington D.C.: US Department of Education, National Institute on Education.

A report written for the US Department of Education examines independent reading. Researchers found that the amount of reading done outside of school was consistently related to gains in reading achievement. Children will engage in more independent reading when they have greater access to books. The study concluded that libraries play a crucial role for families that cannot afford to buy books.

Anderson, R. C., Wilson P. T., & Fielding L. G. (1988). "Growth in Reading and How Children Spend Their Time Outside of School." *Reading Research Quarterly*. no. 23, 285-303.

A study of 155 fifth grade students demonstrated that the amount of time children spent in independent reading was the best

predictor of the amount of gain in reading achievement.

Borman, G. D., & Boulay, M. (Ed.). (2004). *Summer Learning: Research, Policies, and Programs*. Mahweh, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

An anthology of the most current research-based evidence concerning summer learning and a range of summer school programs.

Celano, D., & Neuman S. B. (2001, February). *The Role of Public Libraries in Children's Literacy Development: An Evaluation Report*. Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Library Association.

Groups of children from the Philadelphia area were monitored for achievement differences between those enrolled in a public library summer reading program and those in a local recreation program. The study demonstrated a positive correlation in reading scores for those children who attended the library summer reading program. In additional findings it was reported that children in the library program spent more time with books, benefited from literacy related activities, and had increased parental involvement with reading.

Cooper, H., Nye B., Linsey J., et al. (1996). "The Effects of Summer Vacation on Achievement Test Scores: A Narrative and Meta-Analytic Review." *Review of Educational Research*, no. 66, 227-268.

Researchers from the University of Missouri performed a meta-analysis of 39 existing research studies that measured summer learning and school achievement. The study found that most students lost an average of one month of school learning over summer vacation. Some students, particularly those from disadvantaged households, lost up to three months of learning. Summer learning loss was greatest in math computation, reading, and spelling.

Cunningham, A. E., & Stanovich K. E. (1998). "What Reading Does for the Mind." *American Educator/American Federation of Teachers*. Spring/Summer, 1-8.

The authors study the so-called "Matthew effects" in relation to the phenomena in which reader exposure to print can create a rich-get-richer, poor-get-poorer pattern of reading development. They conclude that successful early reading experiences can have a cascading effect on the mind that can benefit readers regardless of innate ability. The study also found that an increased volume of reading was an important factor in building language and vocabulary skills.

Cunningham, J.W. (2001). "Report of the National Reading Panel: teaching children to read: An evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction." *Reading Research Quarterly*, 36(3), 326–335.

An important finding of this review of hundreds of related studies revealed that "the more children read, the better their fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension."

Ed.gov, Pressroom (2009, June). Retrieved August 21, 2009, from Ed.gov website:

<http://www.ed.gov/news/av/video/2009/06/interview.html?exp=6>

The United States Education Department posted an interview with the Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, in which he addresses the need for more time to properly educate students. Duncan stresses that summer learning loss is a giant step backward for disadvantaged children.

Elling, D. M. (2009, July) "Department of Ed encourages summer learning programs." Retrieved August 21, 2009, from Mott News website:

<http://www.mott.org/news/news/2009/summerwebinar.aspx>.

The Mott Educational Foundation summarizes the Department of Education's focus on the development and launch of high quality summer

programs that take advantage of time outside of school to help children learn, grow, and develop..

Heyns, B. (1978). *Summer Learning and the Effects of Schooling*. New York: Academic Press Inc.

In her foundational study, Heyn published a book length survey of 6th and 7th grade students from Atlanta who were studied over a period of two years. The work concluded that students from different socioeconomic backgrounds achieved similar rates of academic progress during the school year. However, when the summer break was studied it was determined that students from the lower socioeconomic strata fell behind academically at a faster rate than their more advantaged peers. The book concluded that factors outside of the school environment were affecting academic achievement. The book also studied public libraries and found them to be an important source for children's reading during the summer break.

Krashen, S., (2009). Anything but Reading. *Knowledge Quest*, 37 (No. 5), 19-25.

Krashen, S. (2004) *The Power of Reading: Insights from the Research*, 2nd edition. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. *Stephen Krashen, a linguist and leading researcher in voluntary reading, suggests that an often overlooked method to improve reading is providing readers with a supply of interesting and accessible books. Research demonstrates that self-selected voluntary reading leads to the greatest gains in reading achievement and other aspects of literacy. Krashen also suggests that libraries can alleviate some of the literacy problems created by impoverished family conditions.*

Krashen, S., & Shin F. (2004). Summer Reading and the Potential Contribution of the Public Library in Improving Reading for Children of Poverty. *Public Library Quarterly*, 23 (3/4), 99-109.

Research shows that there is very little difference in reading gains between children from high and low-income families during the school year. Over

the summer, children from high-income families make better progress in reading and the difference is cumulative over time. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit from increased access to books and attendance at public library programs.

McGill-Franzen, A., & Allington R. (2003 May/June) "Bridging the Summer Reading Gap." *Instructor*, 112 no. 8. Retrieved August 21, 2009, from Wilson Web: http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com/hww/results/results_single.jhtml;hwwilsonid=PD4V12BFA5CXDQA3DIKSFF4ADUNGIIVO

Educational researchers from the University of Florida show that educators and parents can help their children avoid summer learning loss. The authors cite research suggesting that children who read as few as six books over the summer break can maintain their reading skills at a level achieved in the preceding school year. The article also notes that public libraries in the poorest neighborhoods often suffer from shorter hours and restrictive lending policies.

McGill-Franzen, A., & Allington R. (2004) "Lost Summers: Few Books and Few Opportunities to Read." Retrieved August 21, 2009, from Reading Rockets: <http://www.readingrockets.org/articles/394>

The article reviews the problems associated with children who fall behind in reading skills due to lack of access to books over the summer vacation. The authors provide an overview of existing research and conclude that reading over the summer is a strong experience that contributes to learning retention.

McLaughlin, B., & Smink J. (2009, June) "Summer Learning: Moving from the Periphery to the Core." *The Progress of Education Reform*, no. 3, Retrieved August 20, 2009, from Summer Learning.org. <http://www.summerlearning.org/media/researchandpublications/2009/ECSMovingfromPeripheryBrief.June2009.pdf>

A publication from the Education Commission of the States stresses that summer learning has become a centerpiece in educational reform

strategies. The authors suggest the need for a blended approach to summer programs that address the academic and creative needs of children.

McQuillan, J. (1998). *The Literary Crisis: False Claims, Real Solutions*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann. In J. T. Guthrie & E. Anderson (Eds.) *Engaged reading: Processes, practices, and policy implications* (pp. 17-45). New York: Teachers College.

The author studies the recent history of literacy achievement among children in the United States and seeks to debunk common myths and misunderstandings about reading. McQuillan suggests that exposure to comprehensible, interesting reading material is the simplest and best way to improve reading achievement.

Miller, B. M. (2007) "The Learning Season: The Untapped Power of Summer to Advance Student Achievement." *Nellie Mae Education Foundation*, 1-70.

Dr. Beth Miller, sponsored by the Nellie Mae Foundation, provides an in-depth overview of the existing educational research on summer learning. Summer learning loss is described as the major factor in explaining the achievement gap between middle-class and disadvantaged students by the end of elementary school. The study advocates for increased summer opportunities for children and makes suggestions for further research.

Stanovich, K. E. (2000). *Progress in Understanding Reading: Scientific Foundations and New Frontiers*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Stanovich synthesizes his own and others' research on reading acquisition and literacy development. The author is widely recognized as a premiere, often-cited educational researcher.