



Bridging the Summer Reading Gap

A break from books can mean big losses for at-risk readers, but schools can help keep pages turning and minds sharp.

By Anne McGill-Franzen and Richard Allington

December is fast approaching you can feel the heat of summer in the hallways. Days are longer, attention spans are growing shorter, and everyone is ready for a break. Teachers are planning for their vacation time. Children are ready to shrug off the mantle of "student" for the three-month break, along with the backpacks, the math homework, and the quizzes and tests. But just because school is out, it doesn't mean that reading and learning should stop. Teachers know that many children can't afford to take such a long break. Young readers who don't continue to read over the summer especially those who are reluctant or at-risk are likely to lose crucial ground. One summer off can sometimes mean a whole school year of struggling academic performance.

Summer Reading Loss

Regardless of other activities, the best predictor of summer loss or summer gain is whether or not a child reads during the summer. And the best predictor of whether a child reads is whether or not he or she owns books. While economically-advantaged kids often have their own bedroom libraries, poor kids usually depend heavily on schools for books to read.

Understandably, summer reading loss or "summer setback" is a bigger problem for children from low-income families. Their reading achievement typically declines an average of three months between June and September, while that of typical middle-class students improves or remains the same. This means that a summer reading loss of three months accumulates to a crucial two-year gap by the time kids are in middle school, even if their schools are equally effective. It suggests that focusing all of our efforts on improving the schools isn't going to work.

Children need to read outside of school. Research clearly shows that the key to stemming summer reading loss is finding novel ways to get books into the hands of children during the summer break.

Libraries Fall short

With schools and their libraries closed for the summer, public libraries might seem like a logical solution. However, those located in poor neighbourhoods are often the first to close or restrict hours in a budget crunch. Even when public libraries are open, poor children may lack transportation. Research shows that public library use among poor children drops off when a library is more than six blocks from their home, compared with more than two miles for middle-class children.

Middle-class children might ride their bikes to the library, but poor kids often aren't allowed on the streets by themselves because it's considered too dangerous. And in rural areas, public libraries may be too far away for children to enjoy regularly. Hefty fines for late books can also deter children and their parents from using the public library. Families with little money to spare may not perceive a library that fines as "free."

We also know that teachers and librarians in the poorest communities, are the least likely to allow children to check out books because these schools can't afford to risk the loss of the few books they have. While economically-advantaged schools are able to buy multiple copies of favourite books, poor schools face serious limitations. High-poverty schools use what money they have to buy test-preparation packages, while middle-class schools buy books.

Motivation Matters

Limited access to books is only part of the reason for summer reading loss. While we know that the more children read, the better their fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension, it is less clear how to motivate children to read. Put simply, children whose reading skills are not strong who have a history of less-than-successful reading experiences simply aren't as interested in voluntary reading as are those children with a history of successful reading experiences.

Lower-achieving readers are typically asked to read books that are too difficult. Without books that can be read easily with good comprehension, these less-skilled readers will not improve. All of their cognitive energy is devoted to trying to figure out unknown words which produce a dysfluent, word-by-word reading with little understanding of, or engagement with, the books in their hands.

These disjointed reading experiences fail to help children consolidate skills, and perhaps most significant, such experiences make children feel unsuccessful. They offer little incentive to persevere and, ultimately, participate in the world of readers. Children don't just need books; they need the right books. Providing children with books that fit books that match their skill levels and their interests is an important first step in encouraging voluntary reading.

Holding Their Ground

While the statistics on summer reading loss seem discouraging, there are answers. Studies suggest that children who read as few as six books over the summer maintain the level of reading skills they achieved during the preceding school year. Reading more books leads to even greater success. When children are provided with 10 to 20 self-selected children's books at the end of the regular school year, as many as 50 percent not only maintain their skills, but actually make reading gains.

Summer School Reading

In our current research, we are looking for the most effective ways to support the summer reading of children who struggle with high-stakes assessments and are at risk of failing their grade in school. Many of these children attend mandatory summer school, yet have few opportunities to read extensively in books that are at their level and about topics that truly interest them. Our work suggests that if children have opportunities to listen to, discuss, and read books on topics that they select, or books about characters that they love, they develop extensive background knowledge that can scaffold their independent reading and sustain their engagement. Summer school must provide interventions that accomplish these goals.

Getting the Books Out

School book collections are typically the largest and nearest supply of age-appropriate books for children. When teachers and school libraries can find ways to share books with students over the summer, the gains can be notable. This low-cost, low-intensity intervention obviously can't address the many and varied reading needs of all students. But it is a starting point. With planning, there are simple ways to ensure that books become available to any child at any time of year but especially in the summer, when the reading should be easy.

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