

SUMMERS: SOME ARE READING, SOME ARE NOT! IT MATTERS

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Does summer reading really work? Can simply giving books to children actually help close the achievement gap? The authors tell us what we know and what we are still learning about summer reading.

*"They're funny, especially this one (*Mud!*), and I got this (*Clifford*) because my sister loves them, and this one (*Clifford*) and this one (*Clifford, Lil' Bill, Franklin*)—all these are me and my sister's, and the reason I got her one is because I love her." —Second grader selecting free books at the Annual Book Fair*

Schools with many students from poor families struggle mightily to turn around low academic performance, as evidenced by the mixed success of reform efforts and parent programs. The gap is already large upon students' entry to kindergarten, exacerbated over time by the few resources for academic learning available to poor families over the summer, and ultimately reflected in a much lower graduation rate. As a harbinger of the future, a steadily increasing achievement gap translates into intergenerational poverty and diminished human potential.

Alert! The Majority of Our Public School Children Are Poor

According to data compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics and reported by the Southern Education Foundation (Suitts, 2015), *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and NPR, for the first time in history, the majority of this country's public school children (51%) are from poor families. The highest percentages of poor children

attend schools in the South and Southwest (17 states), the West (four states), and the Appalachian states of Kentucky, West Virginia, and Tennessee, all states with the least educational resources allocated to support students from low-income families. The average per-student educational expenditure in the South and West is \$9,300, compared with \$16,045 in the Northeast, the region with the lowest percentages of poor students.

Poverty and Low Educational Outcomes Go Hand in Hand

On the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the gap in learning between children from low-income families and their more advantaged peers has remained stubbornly wide between 2003 and 2011, even as the number of children in poverty has dramatically increased. Not only are student expenditures on schooling unequally distributed across high- and low-poverty states, but

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parents in different income brackets are not equally able to contribute to their children's learning beyond the school day. The recently released report *Whither Opportunity? Rising Inequality, Schools, and Children's Life Chances* (Duncan & Murnane, 2011) highlighted the academic consequences of disparities in parental income on children: The rich/poor achievement gap is 30–40% greater now than several decades ago and is twice the black/white achievement gap. Recent analyses have demonstrated that income and achievement gaps occur in tandem: Poor families not only have less money to spend in general than more advantaged families, but they invest proportionately less in the cognitive development of their children, particularly literacy activities, that would support out-of-school learning.

Because they recognize the importance of resources beyond the school day and school year, educators—teachers, principals, and policymakers—have tried to offset the deleterious effects of poverty on children's literacy development with homegrown and packaged approaches to stem summer reading loss. From outfitting makeshift bookmobiles of every imaginable configuration of car, truck, or bus with racks of books, and sometimes a volunteer librarian or teacher, for reaching families that are geographically and socially isolated to creating sophisticated algorithms that match children with interesting books at their reading level, educators have tried almost everything to put books in kids' hands during the summer. Given the plethora of approaches, what have we learned? What makes a difference in whether children read or not, and does it matter? Is there a cultural difference in the way middle class or upper middle class children spend time during the summer, and if so, does that matter? What about English learners (ELs)?

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Should we think differently about them? Is there a role for the school—teachers and librarians—during the summer and beyond?

A “Scholarly Culture” of Home Books Affects Literacy Development

Sociologists call home books a marker for a scholarly culture that speaks to a preference for and an enjoyment of reading. Reading for pleasure conveys not only skills and knowledge useful for school but also a disposition toward learning that makes school congenial and even enjoyable (Evans, Kelley, Sikora, & Treiman, 2010). By looking at international achievement data across 27 countries, researchers determined that a home library is as important as parental education and twice as important as the father's occupation in predicting educational outcomes. Not surprisingly, the impact is greatest for children of the least well-educated parents with fewer home library books: “It is at the bottom, where books are rare, that each additional book matters most” (Evans, *et al.*, 2010, p. 187).

Poor Children Lose Ground Over the Summer; More Advantaged Children Do Not

In a classic study of seasonal learning in Atlanta—that is, achievement growth over the summer months compared with school-year learning—sociologist Barbara Heyns (1978) found that children from low- and middle-income families learned at a faster rate when

school was in session and that children from low-income families tended to lose ground over the summer. Her analyses demonstrated that summer reading—whether measured by books read, time spent reading, or library usage—was the only activity “strongly and consistently related to summer learning” (p. 161), and this effect was irrespective of family income.

A decade or so later, sociologists associated with the Baltimore Beginning School Study confirmed what Heyns found and what teachers already knew: Summer slide in achievement really exists, and it disproportionately affects children from low-income families. Entwisle and her colleagues (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007) used the metaphor of a faucet to explain why. During the year when school is in session, resources, like books, are “turned on” and available to all children. Not so during the summer. Lack of access to books over the summer, when school is not in session, had especially far-reaching achievement consequences in reading—a two-month loss over each summer for poor children versus a gain of roughly one month for more advantaged children, which contributed to an achievement gap of several years by eighth grade (Alexander *et al.*, 2007).

Free Self-Selected Books Can Improve Reading Performance and Stop Summer Reading Loss

Conversely, a recent meta-analysis of 108 rigorous studies conducted by

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the American Institutes for Research for the Reading Is Fundamental (RIF) Community Foundation found that book giveaway programs may mitigate that disadvantage with effect sizes that are 1–4 times that of average school interventions. Lindsay (2013), writing about the impact of giving or lending books or other high-interest material like magazines to children, noted that such interventions are not just *related* to educational outcomes, but book distribution programs like RIF actually *cause* improved attitudes toward reading; *cause* increased reading volume—children read more and for longer periods of time; *cause* accelerated development of emergent reading skills; and *cause* more proficient reading performance. Specific features of the book distribution programs moderated the impact of some interventions and provide hints to those of us who try to design such programs:

- Book ownership is more powerful than book lending programs.
- Guidance to parents on coreading or interacting with children around books may have larger impacts.
- Guidance to teachers on integrating books with other literacy activities may have larger impacts.
- Allowing student choice may increase the effects of book distribution, particularly on early reading skills.

Simply giving books to children that they themselves select may be all that’s needed to make a significant difference

in summer reading performance as well. The Annual Summer Book Fair, a well-researched, low-cost summer reading intervention, not only mitigated summer reading loss but also improved the achievement of participating elementary children from low-income families. The randomized controlled trial study (Allington et al., 2010) established that providing 10–12 free self-selected books to first- and second-grade cohorts ($n = 1,713$) from 17 high-poverty urban, primarily African American, elementary schools over three summers not only mitigated summer reading loss but also increased students’ annual reading achievement on the high-stakes Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test at the third- and fourth-grade levels by 0.14 standard deviation (*SD*) overall and close to 0.21 *SD* for the poorest students. The study was inexpensive—about \$150 per child for three years—but obtained the same results (0.14 *SD*) as attending summer school (Cooper, Charlton, Valentine, & Muhlenbruck, 2000) and had larger effects than whole-school reform ($d = 0.09$ – 0.14 ; Borman, Hewes, Overman, & Brown, 2003). As noted by the authors of the Top Tier Evidence website (Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy, 2011), the

average annual gain in reading achievement for U.S. students during fourth and fifth grades on seven nationally normed tests is 0.36 and 0.40 standard deviations respectively (see Bloom, Hill, Black, and Lipsey, 2008). The difference in achievement between Book Fair and control group students is 35–40% of these annual gains. (p. 2)

The Annual Book Fair has met the “near top tier” evidence standard, according to the Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy, needing only to extend the study to children beyond a single state and to rural populations of children from low-income families in order to meet the highest standard for research-based rigor (top tier).

Do Students Self-Select Books They Can Read Independently, and If Not, What Level of Support Should Be Provided?

Although significant reading gains were associated with participation in the book fairs, the study did not address important factors that may have influenced participants’ performance. Nonetheless, the study yielded data that provide a starting point for exploring why access to self-selected books mitigates reading loss for some students and not others and what scaffolds might be necessary for some students.

The youngest students—those who started selecting summer books as first graders—made the most progress in the Annual Book Fairs. This finding is consistent with that of Lindsay’s (2013) book distribution meta-analysis in that the largest effects were for the development of emergent literacy skills. Students who selected somewhat more challenging books each summer also made more gains, an interesting finding that may indicate increasing fluency and comprehension over the course of three summers for students adept at self-selection of appropriate out-of-school reading material or may simply suggest that students who increased their volume of reading during the

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summer—that is, actually read the books—improved. Both explanations might also be correct.

Self-Selected Texts Themselves May Scaffold Less Confident or Beginning Readers

Students in the Annual Book Fair overwhelmingly preferred series books—texts that are redundant in language and literacy elements and, thus, are themselves scaffolds for struggling or less confident readers and are highly motivating. Literary theorists (Rabinowitz, 1998) and educational psychologists (Feitelson, Goldstein, Iraqi, & Share, 1993; Meyer & Poon, 2004) alike have long hypothesized that sustained experience reading particular kinds of text develops implicit understandings about narrative and expository structures that, in turn, facilitate readers’ comprehension of novel texts. The redundancy of language elements and formulaic plots found in highly popular series books, selected most often in the Annual Book Fairs, may promote narrative comprehension in much the same way that wide reading of easy books with a small corpus of sight words and spelling patterns by beginning readers develops oral reading fluency (McGill-Franzen & Ward, 2015).

The book fair study did not investigate whether students were able to

independently read the books that they selected or whether they did, in fact, read these self-selected books. Students who returned book logs (indicating likes and dislikes, a proxy for evidence that the books were read) improved more than students who did not. However, for many of the lowest achieving students, the books they selected may have been too difficult for them to read independently without support.

Personal Technology Devices May Provide Motivation and Support for Struggling Readers

Although not part of the Annual Book Fair, providing e-book or audio formats that are highly motivating and programmable may accomplish the following: (a) allow low-achieving readers to access books that might otherwise be too challenging for them to initially read independently by providing word recognition and word meaning functions; (b) document whether the books were read or listened to and, if so, how often; and (c) glean insight into the nature and repetition of comprehension strategies employed by readers at diverse levels of proficiency with text that varies by genre and difficulty.

For her dissertation, Mitchell (2013) studied perspectives of 20 non-proficient fifth graders on their

use of Nook e-readers during the summer. Portability, access to a great number of high-interest books (about 75), the utility of a dictionary, and the possibility of connecting with friends made the use of Nook e-readers an attractive alternative to paper books:

In the summer I was reading a book on a camping trip. Everyone went to bed and I pretended that I was asleep and it was like midnight and I slept underneath. We had a bunk bed and I had these little lights. I was on the bottom bunk and it was really dark so I flipped the switch on and then I just read and read. I looked at the clock and it said 2:30am. I just said that I wanted to keep reading but I finally had to stop (Focus Group Interview, 9.12.12). (pp. 104–105)

I think it was a lot easier to read and to comprehend just because the dictionary was really helpful. I mean at home I only have a little children’s dictionary, like still 300 pages but had no words that I need in it. (p. 169)

Because they enable less competent readers to engage in higher order comprehension processes and interact socially around texts (Sheaffer & Kinney, 2003), audiobooks are especially beneficial for at-risk populations, and low-endurance readers tend to stay on task longer when reading electronic texts than when reading the same text in print (Pearman, 2008).

Yet, the majority of children in the United States cannot or do not access books in these formats. Although 75% of children under the age of 8 in

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the United States now have in-home access to at least one mobile device on which e-books or audiobooks could be accessed, large gaps in access continue to persist based on income, and those who have access prefer to use their mobile devices for other activities. In fact, less than one third of children in the United States have actually used a mobile device for reading (Rideout, 2013), and only 43% of school libraries purchased e-books in the last year (Barack, 2014).

Passionate Interest Can Scaffold Readers Struggling With Word-Level Decoding

In a highly unusual interview study of 66 successful dyslexic adults, Fink (1995) identified passionate interest as the support and motivation for them to learn to read, and read avidly they did—in their interest area! Highly successful, these adults developed deep expertise in fields that require massive amounts of technical reading. Included among them are a Nobel laureate in immunology, a member of the National Academy of Sciences in biochemistry, and professors in law, medicine, physics, neuroscience, and design at highly ranked universities—Harvard, Stanford, the University of Pennsylvania, and Brandeis—as well as entrepreneurs in education, business, and theater, to name but a few of the represented professions. These adults struggled with reading as children, were labeled dyslexic, and developed basic fluency three or four years later than their peers. They reported relying on context to figure out unfamiliar words (“Even today, when I can’t figure out a word, I guess from the context. Yes, I guess what makes sense”) or the gist of a narrative (“I get the gist of the story and...I have it pretty much right”; p. 274).

Over time and with practice, most became highly skilled, often reading as accurately as more proficient readers. Even now, however, some adults reported struggling with spelling or word pronunciation, yet to a person, they have a “burning desire to learn more about a topic of passionate personal interest” (Fink, 1995, p. 274). An immunologist reported,

I read a lot, especially about the lives of famous scientists. I had a special dictionary with pictures, and it told about the lives of famous people. Famous scientists and artists, too. I spent many, many hours reading this book as a child. (p. 275)

A biochemist said,

You read science for how things are put together.... My interest in chemistry just came from—it started with my interest in airplanes in grade school...that quickly converted to propellant systems in seventh and eighth grades...I became fascinated with nitrogen chemistry. So the way to understand that was to start reading chemistry books. So I got organic chemistry textbooks. (p. 275)

A gynecologist said,

I went to the library and read a lot on my own...I read lots of history books. I always read history books. Beginning in grade school! And even today, I’m a Civil War buff. I love to read about the Civil War. I own all of Carl Sandburg’s *Abraham Lincoln*, all six volumes, and I’ve read all six volumes! I’ve also read this book, which I’ve read from cover to cover, *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*. (p. 275)

How did adults who struggled with reading as children become “accurate” readers? Fink (2007) believed that the striving readers in her study became proficient readers by reading avidly about a topic that was passionately and personally important to them,

developing deep background knowledge, schema familiarity, and contextual understanding. Familiarity with domain-specific vocabulary, themes, and typical text structures provided the scaffolds that supported their development of increasingly sophisticated literacy skills. (p. 38)

The striving readers interviewed by Fink are in many ways like the young readers today who flock to read, collect, and talk about characters and plot in popular series books. Research librarian Catherine Ross (1995) conducted open-ended interviews of 142 adult *committed readers*—those who identified reading as personally important in their lives and as bringing them a great deal of pleasure. To a person, they remembered becoming hooked on reading by reading series books—moving from one series to another as their literary taste matured. Series books, as well as the topic-specific books identified by the striving readers, enabled children and adolescent readers to become experts in particular domains and identify not only with the characters or topics but also with other readers who had the same interests. Looking back,

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one of the committed readers commented, “I read all the books I could get my hands on!” and another said, “I read them just because everybody else was!” (p. 224).

Some Summer Reading Programs Provide Lexile Matches and Teacher and Parent Instruction to Support Voluntary Reading

Project READS (Reading Enhances Achievement During Summer) is a widely known voluntary summer reading program that provides eight books matched to Lexile levels and interest, plus two strategy lesson books, to participating third- through fifth-grade students in low-income schools. Through a series of planned variations in their evaluations of READS, White, Kim, and their colleagues tested the efficacy of different teacher and parent scaffolds and, in the last study, teacher phone calls to support students’ voluntary reading. The most recent study (White, Kim, Kingston, & Foster, 2014) is a replication of two previous experimental studies. In the replication study, students were randomly assigned to one of two strategy treatments: either books plus teacher scaffolds that were the same as in previous studies (multiple strategy application plus fluency) or books plus a K-W-L strategy. The researchers found a significant effect for both strategy conditions on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills for high-poverty schools—that is, schools with over 75% of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL)—but a negative effect for project READS in moderately poor schools (45–74% FRPL). In comparing the results of the READS replication study with that of the Annual Book Fair, the researchers noted that in both studies, the students who were the poorest (FRPL) made the most gains. In READS projects,

including the most recent published study, all eight books were selected by an algorithm that matched participating students’ Lexile levels and interest preferences. In the Annual Book Fair, 10–12 books were selected by the students themselves from a corpus of 400–600 books. READS is a single-summer project; the Annual Book Fair spanned three consecutive summers. There was no required teacher or parent support at any time during the Annual Book Fair other than school distribution of the books on the last day of school. READS teachers conducted scripted fluency and comprehension strategy instruction with three books at the end of the school year, the two lesson books involved in the instruction were distributed to participating students along with the summer books, questions and prompts were developed for parents to use in their interactions with students around each of the summer books, and teachers called students to remind them to read.

A similar Lexile match summer project was developed and evaluated by the Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest (Wilkins et al., 2012). Researchers conducted an evaluation of whether eight free summer books, matched to reading level and interest as in the Project READS study, and sent to low-achieving (below 50th percentile) third graders from low-income families ($n = 1,785$) in 112 Texas schools, along with reminder postcards, would result in improved reading comprehension on

the Scholastic Reading Inventory for participating students in the fall. The summer book program did not have a significant effect on students’ scores on the inventory, and this result held regardless of the students’ beginning Lexile level. Students who participated in the program reported reading significantly more books (about one) over the summer. What the researchers do not know is whether the low-achieving students from low-income families needed more support from teachers or parents, as in the READS program, or more time, as in the Annual Book Fair. Another question not raised by the authors is whether it is more important to match students’ summer reading books to Lexile levels or to provide students with choice in selection of books for summer reading.

More recently, RIF launched a two-year summer reading project that integrated elements from previously conducted experimental studies, including Project READS and the Annual Book Fair. Project directors combined free book distribution and student choice into their study protocols, both of which have a long history in RIF, the oldest nonprofit children’s literacy foundation. RIF distributed free books to children in low-income schools from 1966, in the early years of the War on Poverty, to 2011, when Congress eliminated its funding. The current project, RIF Summer Success Model, is funded as a research study and involves more

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than 10,000 second and third graders in 144 high-poverty schools (79% FRPL) in 33 mostly rural districts. The RIF project provides 80 informational books to teachers to select for read-alouds over the nine months of the school year instead of three scripted comprehension (and fluency) strategy sessions conducted by teachers at the very end of the school year, as in Project READS. RIF project directors developed study guides on vocabulary development and hands-on experiences to accompany each STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, math) text and posted these guides online, along with spaces for teachers' comments and suggestions for their use. Teachers, librarians, and students reviewed hundreds of contemporary books to select 80 for inclusion in the read-aloud distribution. Using the same algorithm as that of the READS project, participating students received eight self-selected free books from a corpus of 40 books matched to Lexile level and preference. Students' achievement after the first year was measured against expected growth on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, with somewhat disappointing results (Reading Is Fundamental, 2014). Although teachers and students reported overwhelmingly positive experiences with the project and many students moderated summer loss, RIF treatment students who were higher achieving at baseline in Lexile level lost ground relative to their expected growth at the end of the first year (57% of total

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students gained, 4% saw no change, 39% lost ground). In assessing the strengths of the program, the developers identified the high-quality read-aloud STEAM literature (and online suggestions for engagement and curriculum integration), the ability of teachers to choose which books to use and in what ways, and the encouraging rates of teacher and student participation.

Do English Learners Need Similar Resources and Supports as Native Speakers of English?

As schools become increasingly more diverse, it is imperative to consider what research says about eliminating the effects of summer setback for ELs. Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsay, and Greathouse (1996) hypothesized that the summer months may cause students' second-language acquisition to stall without usage. Kim and Guryan (2010) argued that “many low-income Latino children from language minority families may fall behind in reading during summer vacation because of their limited access to books at home and limited opportunities to practice English with family members” (p. 4).

Although a few summer book distribution studies included students of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds as a part of the sample (Butler, 2010; Kim, 2006; Kim & Guryan, 2010; Kim & White, 2008), only a couple of them looked specifically at what works for ELs.

Kim and Guryan's (2010) study looked at the impact of a book distribution program, as well as summer parent literacy events, on over 300 Latino/a fourth graders; 73% of the participating children were classified as ELs. The first group of students received 10 books, the second group received 10 books and participated in three two-hour family

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literacy events over the summer, and the third group was a control group that received 10 books in the fall after the data collection was complete. During a book fair in June, all children selected seven fiction and seven nonfiction titles from 140 available books that were pre-selected by two teachers. Ten books with Lexile levels closest to the child's were sent home. The family literacy events focused on teaching parents how to use comprehension strategies while reading in English and Spanish with their children. However, only 16% of participants attended all three literacy events, and 55% did not attend any. The results of the study were somewhat disappointing. Although participating children reported having read more books, the findings also suggested that “opportunities solely to read 10 books or in combination with a family literacy intervention did not produce significant improvements in children's reading comprehension or vocabulary scores” (Kim & Guryan, 2010, p. 25).

Another study that looked closely at ELs was a dissertation by Butler (2010) at the University of Arkansas, Little Rock. She conducted a quasi-experimental study with 94 disadvantaged ELs and non-ELs in grades 2–4. Again, students were assigned to three groups. The first group received weekly home visits from a teacher who brought new books (whether two picture books or

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one chapter book) for eight weeks in the summer. The second group of children simply took 10 books home to read over the summer and could choose from hundreds of books sorted in bins according to Fountas and Pinnell’s (1996) guided reading levels. The third group was a control group. Reading logs were given to all participants. Butler hypothesized that the children receiving home visits would outperform the group who just got books, but surprisingly, that was not the case. In fact, there were no significant differences between the two groups on the measures administered in the fall, and both treatment groups outperformed the control group, which received only a reading log. Another interesting finding was that ELs and non-ELs made similar gains in all groups, so the language background did not seem to play a significant role in the interventions. Butler concluded that the most critical component of the summer reading engagement was the text itself.

Considering cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic diversity among ELs, much more research is needed in order for us to understand what can prevent ELs’ summer setback in English. It seems

fairly intuitive, however, that offering access to interesting, engaging, and diverse books in either students’ first or second language (or both, as in bilingual books) is a good start. When students are offered an opportunity to select books for themselves, they are more likely to read them over the summer. In fact, although this study was not specifically conducted with ELs, the Scholastic (2014) “Kids & Family Reading Report” revealed that 91% of children ages 6–17 consider books they picked out themselves to be their favorites.

Limited Access to Print and Technology in Libraries and Neighborhoods Is a Structural Impediment to Summer Reading

Children living in high-poverty communities have less access to books and other print material at home, in libraries, or in their neighborhoods (Neuman & Celano, 2001). Although the lack of books in low-income homes has been well documented in research studies, less attention has been given to the print environment of communities, the role of libraries in supporting print and digital media, and access to books for summer reading. Differences documented by researchers in a William Penn Foundation study of print resources in middle- and low-income neighborhoods in the same city found few public places for adults or children to read, no bookstores, and where books were available—drugstores, primarily—few titles in low-income communities: “For every one line of print read by low-income children, middle-income children read three” (p. 19).

Children in rural areas face even greater hardships in accessing print and electronic books. Coupled with inadequate broadband Internet service (Zickuhr & Smith, 2013), which limits

users’ ability to download electronic resources, libraries serving children in these communities are underequipped in terms of library funding, numbers of print resources, numbers of electronic resources, and highly qualified staff to support programming and services (Real, Bertot, & Jaeger, 2014; Sin, 2011).

Even when print and digital materials are equalized in middle- and low-income communities by philanthropic largesse, as in the long-term investment in Philadelphia public libraries, researchers (Neuman & Celano, 2012) documented that the opportunity to learn from these materials is not equal. The library in the high-poverty neighborhood, although well-equipped, lacked resources in terms of technical support by library staff and parental guidance, thereby limiting what children from the low-income community could learn from their experiences with print and digital media. Unlike children in the more advantaged community, whose parents or another adult typically accompanied them to the library, read to them, or helped them select books, children from the low-income community often were on their own, with little guidance or interaction with adults. And without technical assistance to help them access computers and the array of digital resources, children from the low-income community typically treated educational technology like a “video arcade” (p. 19)—randomly pushing keyboards to display lights or action until they lost interest.

Like their public library counterparts, school libraries—where children from low-income families obtain most of their books—provide differential access to resources. Schools with over 40% of children from low-income families (FRPL) were less likely to have more than one librarian than schools with fewer poor children. On average, more advantaged students had access to over

80 hours of staffing per week, compared with only 60 hours of staffing for students in low-income communities, and school librarians in high-poverty schools were more likely to be absent! Researchers found great disparity in the numbers of new volumes added to school libraries each year: The poorest schools added 400 volumes; the wealthiest schools added 1,400 volumes (Pribesh, Gavigan, & Dickinson, 2011).

Much research has established that high-quality school libraries affect student outcomes (Scholastic Research Foundation, 2008). Schools with certified school librarians tend to have higher standardized reading scores, and increased levels of staffing have been linked with improved reading outcomes for students and better services (Kachel, 2013). School librarians serve as literacy leaders in a number of ways. Primary among those is the librarian's role in organizing programs that promote and facilitate children's engagement with and motivation toward reading. In fact, one study found that the strongest predictor of reading enjoyment was the presence of a school librarian (Ontario Library Association, 2006). Yet, many children have limited access to school libraries during the summer months.

Nearly all public libraries in the United States offer some type of summer reading program. However, recent evaluation studies show inconclusive effects. The first study of public library summer reading programs, known as the Dominican Study (Roman, Carran, & Fiore, 2010), suggested that students who participated in these types of programs fared better on standardized tests

than their counterparts who did not; however, the study was criticized for overstating results (Lyons, 2011). In a more recent study of a summer reading program, Justice, Piasta, Capps, Levitt, and Columbus Metropolitan Library (2013) found that children who choose to participate are more likely to be capable and motivated readers prior to rather than as a result of participation.

Neighborhood Contexts Are Structural Supports or Limitations to School-Year Reading and Summer Reading

Contrary to the findings of the Baltimore Beginning School Study, which was conducted several decades ago and found that students from low-income families learned at the same rate as more advantaged peers during the school year, more recent analyses of seasonal learning detected a school-year disadvantage in reading for students from low-socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, students as well as a summer disadvantage. Using achievement and census information from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study–K, Benson and Borman (2010) asserted that schools can compensate somewhat for the achievement gap at school entry, but the “magnitude of the disadvantage for low-SES students—especially in first grade—stands out as a significant problem” (p. 1372). Although minority children from families with similar income levels as whites demonstrated comparable literacy knowledge upon entry to kindergarten (with Hispanic children performing somewhat lower),

“Providing guidance makes intuitive sense, but guidance that seems too much like school may not be as effective as educators had hoped.”

the achievement gap widens along racial and ethnic dimensions during the first two years of school. The researchers suggested that the causes of inequality cannot be attributed to schools alone. Instead, the results showed a “portrait of the inequalities that schools inherit from their neighborhood contexts” (p. 1372), reflecting the poverty or affluence within attendance zones. Living in a low-income neighborhood further disadvantaged children from low-income families (0.10 *SD*), and an affluent neighborhood conferred additional advantages to children from higher SES backgrounds (0.23 *SD*). The researchers explained that sociological investigations into income and achievement stratification hold that social structure—schools and libraries—affects children's outcomes, not only individual characteristics such as ethnicity or language and family backgrounds. In order to ameliorate summer and school-year learning gaps in reading, they asserted that policy must replicate “the advantages present in socially advantaged neighborhoods and schools” (p. 1377).

Wrapping Up: What We Know About Summer Reading Programs Student Need

From experimental studies of summer reading programs, we know that the

“From experimental studies of summer reading programs, we know that the poorest children benefit the most from free book distributions.”

poorest children benefit the most from free book distributions. As indicated earlier, it is where “books are rare that each individual book matters most” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 187). If educators must make hard choices about how to allocate resources for summer reading, they must give books to the neediest students! Focusing resources on children who live and attend school in poor neighborhoods may help address contextual disadvantages of poverty.

Teacher and Parent Guidance

Even though results from the meta-analysis of book distribution programs (Lindsay, 2013) suggest that guidance to caregivers may improve the efficacy of giving books to children and that student choice may be supportive of growth in reading development, not all experimental interventions provided either guidance or choice, and none provided both. Providing guidance makes intuitive sense, but guidance that seems too much like school may not be as effective as educators had hoped. Three experimental programs (i.e., Project READS) provided explicit guidance in the form

“Free books when possible and easy access to and appropriate mentoring of the technology and print resources in libraries are key to improving educational support in low-income communities.”

of several scripted end-of-year lessons by teachers in comprehension strategy and fluency instruction. Also included were specific instructions and questions for parents to use during the summer to support reading. In one study, teachers also called students on the phone to remind them to read. It is instructive to remember that the READS replication study found significant positive effects only among students attending the highest poverty schools (over 75% FRPL); there were negative effects for READS in schools with poverty levels up to 74% FRPL—the majority of schools. The RIF summer reading program provided online suggestions for teachers to use during the school year with informational read-aloud books, but it was not clear if guidance for summer reading was provided to parents.

Reading Lexile Match

Another important difference—matching children’s summer books to their reading level—was incorporated into all but one summer reading intervention (Allington et al., 2010). Studies that used a reader–Lexile match also incorporated children’s reading preferences from an interest inventory into the algorithm that selected eight books for summer reading. The Regional Educational Laboratory study that used the same algorithm for eight free summer books found no significant positive achievement results for low-achieving students from low-income families; Project READS found mixed results, as did the exploratory RIF summer book program, which also used the Lexile match algorithm to select eight books for free distribution.

Student Choice

The single book fair study (Allington et al., 2010) that incorporated student choice into the program design also

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provided access to an extremely large corpus of books from which students self-selected 10–12 to take home for summer reading, and provided a larger number of free books than in the Lexile match studies. The Annual Book Fair found significant achievement gains over a three-year period.

One Summer or Every Summer?

Gains (and losses) in reading are cumulative and accrue incrementally; examining summer gains over the few months of summer is fraught with difficulty. The longitudinal nature (three years) of the Annual Book Fair allows more opportunity for students to develop reading engagement and proficiency than the other approaches that spanned a single summer.

Looking Ahead: What We’re Learning

It may seem that the findings from experimental studies are not entirely clear. Should interest and choice be privileged or reading level and Lexile level matched? Will providing books for a single summer help stem summer reading loss, or does it have to happen every summer? What guidance and scaffolds should teachers, librarians, and parents provide, if anything, to support students’ summer reading?

A Recreational Reading Framework

Interview studies may give us some insight into the nature of appropriate scaffolding. A retrospective study of teachers, parents, and children in low-income Australian schools found that all students reported summer reading; they and their parents said that interest motivated and sustained reading, and students claimed reading support from someone at home. By comparing the guidance offered by teachers whose students did not lose ground over the summer with those whose students did, researchers found differences in the way teachers framed summer reading—for recreation and enjoyment or as homework or strategy building. Teachers who were more successful in ameliorating summer learning loss reported prompting students to monitor for enjoyment or “inquiring” rather than for achievement, encouraging students to ask themselves, “What kind of reading do I enjoy?” and “How can I find these texts?” Based on self-reports and interview data, researchers suggested that teachers and parents provide guidance that emphasizes “supporting recreational reading over summer which does not have a remedial or skills-building focus” (Jesson, McNaughton, & Kolose, 2014, p. 53) and does not constitute more “work” for students.

Privilege Access and Interest

Students who lost ground over the summer identified access to interesting materials that they wanted to read as a problem. This finding prompted researchers to suggest that teachers should assist students in using print and digital public library resources. Fiscal policies that put more staff mentors in libraries in low-income neighborhoods would be a valid and promising allocation of resources.

Concluding Thoughts

From interviews of striving and committed readers and the retrospective interviews of teachers and parents of engaged students who did not experience summer reading loss, we can say with confidence that interest and choice motivates and sustains reading. Recreational, pleasure-seeking, leisure reading should be the focus of guidance offered in summer reading approaches. Free books when possible and easy access to and appropriate mentoring of the technology and print resources in libraries are key to improving educational support in low-income communities. As Suitts (2015) of the Southern Education Foundation admonished in his latest report,

Without improving the educational support that the nation provides its low-income students—students with the largest needs and usually with the least support—the trends of the last decade will be prologue for a nation not at risk, but a nation in decline. (p. 4)

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