

## **Lost summers: Few books and few opportunities to read.**

Anne McGill-Franzen and Richard Allington

University of Florida  
2403 Norman Hall  
Gainesville FL 32611

Tele  
352 393 9191 x 266

Email  
[mcgillUFL@aol.com](mailto:mcgillUFL@aol.com)  
[DickaUFL@aol.com](mailto:DickaUFL@aol.com)

*Submitted for publication, December 2000.*

### **Lost summers: Few books and few opportunities to read.**

Why do so few schools provide students with access to books over the summer months? Why would it matter that school libraries are typically closed and the books locked away for 3 months? That classroom libraries sit undisturbed for the summer period? It matters because although we live in a rich nation, there are huge and documented differences in access to books, differences largely linked to family incomes. Enhancing children's access to books during the summer, especially poor children's access, is important for several reasons.

#### **Access to books.**

As we wondered in our 1993 Education Week commentary about Secretary Riley's urging parents to "turn off the TV and read to their children": What were poor parents supposed to be reading? Low-income families have little discretionary income and, as a result, the children (and adolescents) of these families rarely have home book collections (e.g., bedroom libraries) to draw on for voluntary reading (Heyns, 1978; Smith, Constino & Krashen, 1997). In addition, we have documented that schools that serve many children from low-income families typically have far fewer books available in school or classroom libraries and have more restrictive book lending policies (Allington & Guice, 1997; McGill-Franzen, et al, 1996). Thus, schools serving large numbers of poor children have typically provided little redress to inequities in book access.

But to become skilled at almost any activity, whether the skills are physical or more cognitive in nature, requires extensive practice. According to the recent report of the National Reading Panel (2000) literally hundreds of correlational studies suggest that

“the more children read, the better their fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.” (p. 12) While volume of reading during the school day and school year has more often been a focus of our work (e.g., McGill-Franzen, Allington, Yokoi & Brooks, 1999), we are now looking at children’s out-of-school reading opportunities, especially opportunities for voluntary reading during the summer vacation period. We are concerned about children’s opportunities to read during the summer because of the consistent and powerful findings about the differential impact of summer vacation on the reading development of children from different economic circumstances.

### **Summer reading loss.**

There have been a number of studies documenting what has been dubbed “summer reading loss” among children of low-income families. These studies were included in a statistical meta-analysis conducted by Harris Cooper and his colleagues at the University of Missouri (1996). They showed that summer vacations created, on average, an annual reading achievement gap of about 3 months between students from middle- and lower-income families, favoring the students from the more economically advantaged families. In other words, the reading achievement of children from low-income families declined between June and September while the achievement of more economically advantaged children remained stable or inched upward

A summer loss of 3 months accumulates over the elementary grade summers to become a gap of 18 months by the end of 6th grade. By middle school, summer reading loss plus an initial achievement lag at the beginning of 1st grade, produces a cumulative lag of 2 or more years in reading achievement, even when effective instruction during the school year is available. A similar pattern of disadvantage was replicated in the recent Baltimore Beginning School Study (Entwisle, Alexander & Olson, 1997).

### **Why do some children lose ground in the summer?**

Within the total population of low-income children there are different achievement patterns during the summer months. Higher-achieving students from lower-income families fared better than lower-achieving students. Lower-achieving poor children demonstrated a greater summer reading loss than higher-achieving poor children (Puma, et al, 1997). This pattern suggests that poor children’s limited access to books during the summer months cannot alone explain the consistent finding of substantial summer reading loss. It seems likely that there are any number of motivational and volitional factors that influence reading activity. For instance, children’s voluntary reading seems linked to past experiences as more- or less-successful readers. A history of less-successful reading experiences produces a lessened interest in voluntary reading than a history of successful reading experiences (Guthrie & Anderson, 1999).

There is extensive research linking successful reading experiences (accurate, fluent, high comprehension) to better reading progress (Allington 2001).. Lower-achieving readers are typically asked to read books that are too difficult. Without practice reading books of

an appropriate level of difficulty, books that are read easily with good comprehension, less-skilled readers will not improve.

When less-skilled readers are given books that are too hard, all of their cognitive energy is devoted to trying to figure out unknown words, producing a dysfluent, word-by-word reading with little understanding of, or engagement with, the books in their hands. Such experiences provide children with no opportunity to consolidate skills they may have been taught but not yet learned to use independently. Perhaps, most significantly, such experiences make children feel unsuccessful and provide little incentive to persevere and, ultimately, participate in the world of readers. But providing books of appropriate complexity seems only the first step in encouraging voluntary reading (McGill-Franzen, 1993).

There is good evidence that building on student interest can stimulate voluntary reading activity, even among lower-achieving readers. Fostering interest in voluntary reading requires that children have some autonomy in choosing the texts to be read as well as access to a substantial quantity of books that vary on several dimensions including difficulty, genre, topic, and length. In an optimal environment, self-selection of books on topics of personal interest, or written by favorite authors, or within a particular genre, are all important features of efforts to promote greater voluntary reading, especially among lower-achieving students.

**This brief review of the relevant research has established that:**

- Summer reading loss is one factor contributing to the achievement gap between more and less economically advantaged students.
- Children from low-income families have more restricted access to books, both in school and at home, than do their more advantaged peers.
- Lower-achieving readers read less in school and out of school than higher-achieving readers. Evidence points to a social class effect here, with poor children having fewer in-school and out-of-school reading opportunities.
- Better readers read more than poorer readers, supporting the importance of extensive, successful reading experiences in the development of reading proficiency.

**Intervening to minimize summer reading loss.**

So what might schools do to minimize summer reading loss? We recommend three strategies be given serious consideration.

- Putting books in their hands. The most obvious intervention plan would begin with simply ensuring that children from low-income families had a supply of appropriate books to read during the summer vacation period. This low-cost, low-

intensity intervention would be obviously insufficient to address the many and varied reading needs of low-income students, particularly struggling readers, but it would be a starting point. Our best estimate is that providing children with 10-20 self-selected children's books just as the regular school year ends would have a positive impact on the reading development of 25-50 percent of the participating children from low-income families. Supplying the books might be accomplished by:

- · Allowing students to check out school or classroom library books for the summer. You might want to limit children to 5 books initially and schedule the library to open one evening each week in the summer so that children could return read books and select new books to read. But be cautious about penalizing children for normal wear and tear on books used during the summer. There is no more effective way to discourage poor children from taking library books home for the summer than to emphasize the fines that will be levied for damages.
- · Sponsoring school bookfairs where children simply examine a substantial supply of books and order the 10-20 they select as of interest to them. These books would be delivered to them on the final day of the school year. Of course, this works best in schools where children come from families that have funds to buy books. In schools serving many children from low-income families money might be allocated from the school budget (e.g., buy summer books rather than test preparation workbooks) or from federal programs funds. At one school here in Gainesville, local merchants provided funds to allow each child to select a single book for summer reading and one book is better than none.
- · Create a “Books for Buck” program that recycles paperback books and books purchased through the inexpensive book distribution program. At a Virginia elementary school, such a program operates during the school year but with a push to increase the supply of books just before the year ends. At a dollar apiece, books become affordable to many poor children (and some of the books are actually sold for a quarter-dollar).
- · Better yet, create an “honor library” that provides a steady supply of new and used paperbacks that children can select books from. Such libraries work like those found in public places many middle-class resort communities. You take a book and they hope you bring it back when you are done reading it. Such libraries have been created in a number of schools from supplies of kid and community donated books, books purchased at garage sales, and books purchased just for the honor library. Wire racks that display books might simply be placed outside the school entrance each day during the summer months so that children (and their parents) can just drop by and pick up a book to read (and return one borrowed earlier).

## Summary.

Too many children spend their summer with no books to read. The children most likely to experience such a fate are poor children. And yet, Heyns (1978, p. 161) found that, "The single summer activity that is most strongly and consistently related to summer learning is reading." School book collections are typically the largest and nearest supply of age appropriate books for school children. We must create ways to put books into all children's hands during summer vacation periods (and other school vacation periods as well). Rethinking the role of the school book collections and revisiting school budget allocations such that books become available to any child at any time of the year will be a good first step in enhancing children's summer reading.

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