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The Impact of Summer Setback on The Reading Achievement Gap



If we are to close the achievement gap between low-income students and more-advantaged students, we will need to focus on a phenomenon that has been largely overlooked: summer reading setback. Mr. Allington and Ms. McGill-Franzen look at the research and derive recommendations for reform that will specifically address the conditions that contribute to this serious problem.

BY RICHARD L. ALLINGTON AND ANNE MCGILL-FRANZEN

POOOR CHILDREN have never fared as well as more advantaged children in American schools. In recognition of this reality, federal funding for interventions for economically disadvantaged students was initiated through Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1966 (ESEA). The aim was to provide funding for supplementary educational interventions in the hope of narrowing the achievement gap that existed between more- and less-advantaged students.¹ While there is some evidence that this achievement gap has narrowed over time,² the most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in reading provides strong evidence of the pervasive nature of this seemingly intractable rich/poor achievement gap. For instance, twice as many low-income fourth-graders (those eligible for subsidized lunches) as students who were not low income fell below the basic NAEP level (58% versus 27%), and far fewer low-income students achieved at the proficient level (13% versus 40%).³

There have been a variety of explanations for the rich/poor achievement gap. It is most likely that there are multiple sources for the gap. Over the past three decades researchers have explored a variety of school-based interventions designed to reduce or eliminate the gap. What surprises us is that during all this time, both researchers and policy makers have

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largely ignored the role that summer reading setback plays in creating this achievement gap.⁴

Summer reading setback occurs when students return to school after summer vacation with diminished reading skills, presumably from a lack of adequate reading practice. Summer setback affects children from families of different socioeconomic groups differently. Available research indicates that the reading achievement of poor children, as a group, typically declines during the summer vacation period, while the reading achievement of children from more economically advantaged families holds steady or increases modestly.

With the most recent reauthorization of the ESEA, the reading achievement gap has again risen on the national education agenda. Federal funding for interventions that would narrow the achievement gap is flowing, though this time with restrictions such that the interventions must be informed by "scientific research." Once again, the current preferred intervention designs seem to focus on the youngest students and on the development of basic phonological skills.⁵ But we have been down this path before; federal funding for code-emphasis early interventions dominated the 1970s and 1980s, and yet the achievement gap remains large.⁶ Perhaps it is time to consider alternative directions in the campaign to close the rich/poor reading achievement gap.

AN ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATION

Twenty years ago, researchers contrasting the reading achievement patterns in schools enrolling mostly rich students and those enrolling mostly poor students concluded: "Our whole approach to equalizing educational opportunities and achievements may be misdirected."⁷ The authors of a similar, more recent study reached the same conclusion.⁸

In both of these large-scale research studies, the achievement gap between rich and poor children was shown to grow dramatically across the elementary school years (from less than one year's difference to almost three years' difference). Both studies were designed so that data for estimating student achievement at the beginning and end of each school year (September and June) were available. This information allowed the researchers to estimate both the reading growth during the school year and the accumulating impact of summer reading setback.

The powerful and cumulative negative impact of summer setback on poor children's long-term reading achievement led both sets of researchers to argue that efforts targeted only at improving curriculum and instruction in high-

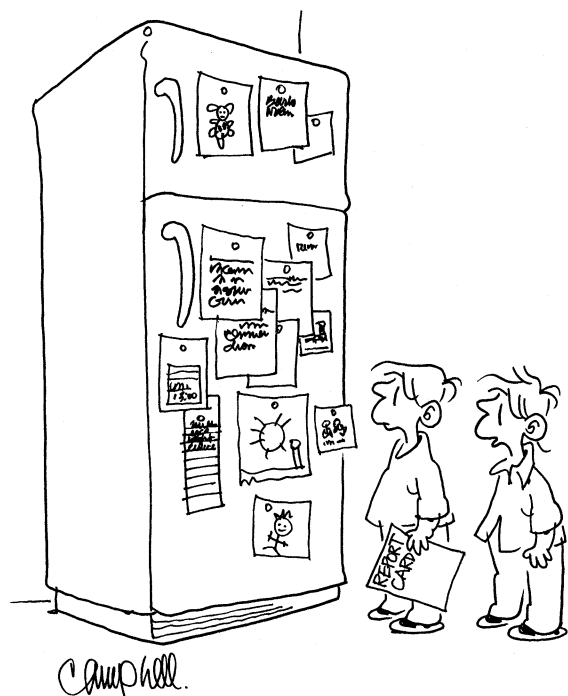
poverty schools were unlikely to close the reading achievement gap between rich and poor children. In their view, much of the school reform effort aimed at improving the reading achievement of poor children failed to focus professional attention on a critical factor in widening the reading achievement gap: the poor child's summer reading setback.

The research. Researchers have been reporting on the impact of summer reading setback for some time now. For instance, two decades ago, Donald Hayes and Judith Grether studied fall-to-spring reading achievement data for students in 600 New York City elementary schools. The schools were first stratified into six categories by proportion of students receiving free or reduced-price lunches. The researchers then compared the cumulative reading development of students in high- and low-poverty schools over time. This analysis demonstrated that a seven-month difference in reading achievement between the two groups of students at the beginning of grade 2 widened to a difference of two years and seven months by the end of grade 6.

However, their analyses of the achievement gains made during the academic year (fall-to-spring comparisons) showed that students in both high-poverty and low-poverty schools made substantially similar gains *when school was in session*. The effects of summer vacation (spring-to-fall comparisons) on reading achievement presented a very different pattern. "The differential progress made during the four summers between 2nd and 6th grade accounts for upwards of 80% of the achievement difference between economically advantaged . . . and . . . ghetto schools," they wrote.⁹ In other words, most of the large gap in reading achievement found at grade 6 could be attributed to summer reading setback along with the smaller initial achievement differences between the two groups of students when they began school.

Similarly, Geoffrey Borman and Jerome D'Agostino noted that, across several large-scale evaluations of the federal Title I remedial reading program, there existed a substantial discrepancy between the reported gains achieved by participating students, depending on whether the gains were reported for fall-to-spring or spring-to-spring testing. They note that "the substantially smaller annual [spring-to-spring] gains . . . suggest that the Title I intervention during the regular school year alone may not sustain their relatively large Fall/Spring achievement improvements."¹⁰

In other words, the effects of remedial reading instruction during the school year were diminished when the summer vacation period was included in the estimates of achievement growth. Since federal Title I funds are targeted to students from low-income families, the summer reading setback phenomenon would produce just such



"Put it under something."

discrepancies in estimates of program impact. Recognition of this phenomenon led Borman and D'Agostino to recommend that greater attention be paid to using Title I funds to provide alternative educational support programs for Title I-eligible students during the summers. However, few Title I programs have actually heeded that advice.¹¹

More recently, Doris Entwisle, Karl Alexander, and Linda Olson reported on their findings from the longitudinally designed Baltimore Beginning School Study, which gathered achievement data from the beginning of grade 1 to the end of grade 5. In this case, the researchers randomly selected 790 students from 20 Baltimore elementary schools beginning in the fall of grade 1. Half the students were from high-poverty neighborhoods/schools and half from more economically advantaged neighborhoods/schools. All students were given a reading achievement test every fall and spring. This design also allowed comparisons of achievement patterns both during the school year and during summer vacation.

Once again, the researchers found that poor children had comparable achievement gains during the school year (fall to spring) across the period of study: "At least through elementary school . . . , the achievement levels of children from poor socioeconomic backgrounds increase on par with those from favored economic backgrounds when school is open."¹²

Nonetheless, by the end of grade 5, the achievement gap between rich students and poor students had widened

to almost three years. Once again, an initial achievement discrepancy of less than one year had grown considerably, even though reading growth during the school year was comparable for both groups of students.

Evidence on the differential impact of summer vacation periods on more- and less-advantaged students' achievement has been available in the scientific literature for some time, and much of that research (13 empirical studies representing approximately 40,000 subjects) was subjected to a meta-analysis by Harris Cooper and his colleagues. They also provided a narrative analysis of another two dozen studies that were available but that failed to provide adequate data for the meta-analytic procedures. Their summary findings confirm the differential impact of summer vacation periods reported in the large-scale longitudinal studies reviewed above: during summer vacation the reading proficiency of students from lower-income families declined, while the reading proficiency of middle-class students improved modestly. The researchers found that summer vacations created, on average, an annual achievement gap of about three months between rich and poor students — favoring, of course, the students from the more economically advantaged families.¹³

This three-month annual gap can accumulate to a year and a half between the end of kindergarten and the end of grade 5 (just five summers). When this accumulating reading achievement gap is combined with an achievement gap at the beginning of schooling, students from lower-income families often find themselves two or three years behind their more-advantaged peers as they head to middle school.

Sources of the summer reading setback. There have been a variety of explanations of the rich/poor achievement gap. Generally, though, the focus of recent reform efforts has been on the nature of the reading instruction offered in schools.¹⁴ Nonetheless, there exists a substantive scientific literature that locates much of the source of the achievement gap outside the school, classroom, curriculum, or instructional program.¹⁵

At the same time, there are good reasons to be optimistic about the potential impact of improving the curriculum and instruction in high-poverty schools, if only because so much work has demonstrated the difference that such improvements can make in student achievement.¹⁶ And certainly we should not ignore the prospect of improving the quality of classroom reading instruction as a way of attempting to ameliorate the rich/poor reading achievement gap, but the scientific evidence of the accumulating impact of summer reading setback on the achievement gap is very compelling. What might be surprising is just

how long that evidence has been largely ignored by educators and policy makers (though recent proposals for mandating summer school for low-achieving students could be viewed as a way of addressing the evidence regarding summer reading setback).

The data available consistently portray summer reading setback as the most potent explanation for the widening of the reading achievement gap between rich children and poor children across the span of the elementary years. But, as Doris Entwisle and her colleagues have suggested, mandating summer school attendance for children from low-income families may not



always be the most appropriate response.¹⁷ At the very least, alternatives to compulsory summer school should be explored, if only for economic and ethical reasons. That is, compulsory summer school attendance for students from low-income families would be an expensive response and would present a potentially discriminatory policy framework.

Volume of reading activity and reading development.

It requires extensive practice to become skilled at almost any activity, whether more physical or more cognitive in nature. In the case of reading proficiency, according to the National Reading Panel (NRP), "Literally hundreds of correlational studies find that the best readers read the most and that poor readers read the least. These correlational studies suggest that the more children read, the better their fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension."¹⁸ Nonetheless, the NRP laments the absence of experimental studies on the effects of reading volume on reading development — though Stephen Krashen provides evidence to counter that perceived shortcoming.¹⁹

The ethical and practical difficulties of conducting studies in which reading volume is rigorously manipulated over time, especially in the face of the powerful and consistent correlational and cross-sectional findings, make it unlikely that experimental research on this issue will soon appear. However, the lack of a substantial experimental research base has not restrained the development of theoretical explanations of the summer reading setback phenomenon.²⁰ These hypotheses tend to be more sociologi-

cal in nature, and only limited attention has been paid to the role of reading volume in summer reading development.

The potential role of reading volume in reading development can be explained, at least in part, by the "self-teaching" hypothesis.

This theoretical model suggests that adequate decoding skills, for instance, are no guarantee of the development of reading proficiency. Developing independent reading proficiency requires "opportunities for self-teaching and other factors such as the quality and quantity of exposure to print."²¹ In other words, the self-teaching model assumes a poten-

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tially powerful role for extensive reading — especially extensive accurate reading — of texts, since it is through these repeated successful exposures to the letter patterns common to English orthography that beginning readers develop rapid, flexible word-identification skills and strategies.²²

But successful reading practice produces benefits beyond developing students' skill in word recognition. As has been well documented, extensive reading is a powerful vocabulary-building strategy,²³ a powerful source for world knowledge and core curricular knowledge,²⁴ and a powerful means of developing understandings of complex written-language syntax and story/text grammars.²⁵ But better readers seem to reap more of these benefits than poorer readers, perhaps because 1) they read more extensively, and 2) they more often read texts that they can read with high levels of accuracy.²⁶ Again, both the quantity (or volume) of reading and the quality (or accuracy) of that reading would be important variables in children's reading development in the self-teaching hypothesis on the positive impacts of reading volume.

Volume of reading during the summer vacation period would seem obviously important to reading development as explained by the self-teaching model. The summer vacation period corresponds to roughly one-third of an academic year. The available evidence suggests, for example, that if schools had some children read virtually nothing during the first three months of school, then the negative effect on reading development would be observ-

able.²⁷ If some children read virtually nothing during June, July, and August, then we might also expect a negative impact on reading development.

There are correlational data that address the relationship between the volume of summer reading and summer reading setback. According to Barbara Heyns, volume of summer reading was the best indicator of summer reading loss or gain.²⁸ Children who read during the summer months were less likely to experience summer reading setback and more likely to have their achievement remain steady or modestly increase. But too many of the poor children in her study read little or nothing during the summer months. Too many also experienced a summer reading setback.

The available research points toward several factors that might explain why reading during the summer months might be less common among poor children. First, elementary school children, especially poor children, report getting most of their reading material from school or classroom library collections,²⁹ and schools serving large numbers of poor children have smaller, older, and less diverse school and classroom library collections than other schools.³⁰ This means that poor children simply have a much more restricted selection of books to read, even during the school year. Children attending high-poverty schools also experience more restricted access to the more limited print resources.³¹ Not only do they have fewer books to select from, but they also have fewer scheduled visits to the library and more restrictions on how many books they can check out and whether the books can be taken home.

Second, beyond the classroom and the school, Susan Neuman and Donna Celano documented the huge differences in access to children's books in differing communities.³² Wealthier communities had three businesses selling children's books for every one that existed in poorer communities. But the differences were even worse when they tallied the number of children's book titles available. In the worst-case scenario, they found more than 16,000 books that could be purchased in the wealthier community and 55 books in the poorer one. On every measure of print access, these researchers documented the gaping differences between what was available in wealthier communities and what was available in

high-poverty neighborhoods. While researchers have often focused on the differences in print access in schools that serve rich children or poor children, this study powerfully documents the substantial advantages beyond the school that accrue to children living in wealthier communities.

Third, family income has been shown to be a powerful predictor of the number of age-appropriate children's books and magazines that are available in the home.³³ The lowest-income families have limited fiscal resources, and book purchases fall into the "discretionary needs" category. One might hypothesize that the limited availability of children's books in high-poverty communities is related to the problem of limited discretionary income. Retailers stock what they can sell. If books are discretionary purchases, then differences in retailers' display of books would seem likely to be related to the amount of discretionary money available to families in different communities. That said, the problem of limited access to books and other reading materials in low-income communities is a persistent one, both in and out of school.³⁴

This access problem is amplified in the summer months, when children typically have no access to the book collections in their schools. Even in high-poverty schools that plan to offer a summer school program, it seems that the school library is too rarely open and available for use. And even classroom libraries are often off-limits (unless the classroom teacher is teaching in the summer school program).



Motivation, reading activity, and summer reading setback. We should be clear, though, that not every poor child experiences summer reading setback. Poor children exhibit a variety of achievement patterns during the summer months. Michael Puma and his colleagues reported that higher-achieving poor students fared better than lower-achieving students.³⁵ That is, lower-achieving poor children demonstrated a greater summer reading setback. While family socioeconomic status and reading achievement are highly correlated, the report's findings suggest that poor children's limited access to books during the summer months is not the sole explanation of the consistent finding of substantial summer reading setback among poor children.

It seems likely that there are any number of motivational and volitional factors as well that influence reading behavior, especially voluntary summer reading activity.³⁶ For instance, children's beliefs about their own efficacy are linked to past academic performance, including their experiences as more- or less-successful readers. A history of less-successful reading experiences produces a lower sense of self-efficacy in readers than a history of successful reading experiences. The lower sense of self-efficacy then predicts lower levels of engagement in reading, especially voluntary reading.³⁷ And it is the poor readers who are most likely to be assigned texts that are too hard — texts they read with little fluency, limited accuracy, and lack of comprehension.³⁸ It is poor readers, then, who would seem least likely to exhibit the motivation to read voluntarily — during the school year or during the summer months. Greater success in school reading, then, is central to enhancing out-of-school voluntary reading. Thus there is a need for a dual focus: improve classroom instruction and at the same time address the problem of poor children's access to appropriately complex books for voluntary summer reading.

Creating classroom environments in which successful reading is the norm — for all children — will mean creating classrooms in which children are well matched to the books they are reading. One-size-fits-all curriculum plans — expecting every child to read the same books — cannot produce a consistent pattern of successful reading. Classroom reform efforts must necessarily be targeted to ensuring that all children have books they can read accurately, fluently, and with understanding.³⁹

It isn't just the motivational research that offers support for attending to the match (or mismatch) between the difficulty of the text and the proficiency of the student. There is an extensive research literature linking successful reading experiences (accurate, fluent, high comprehension) to better reading progress.⁴⁰ Any intervention focused on stimulating voluntary reading must necessarily be concerned about matching the difficulty of books to students' reading proficiency.

But providing books of appropriate complexity seems to be only the first step in encouraging voluntary reading.

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There is good scientific evidence that building on student interest can stimulate an interest in reading, even among lower-achieving readers.⁴¹ Central to fostering enhanced interest in voluntary reading is providing a substantial degree of autonomy in the choice of texts to be read and 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.⁴²

From the available scientific research we draw several conclusions:



- There is abundant evidence that summer

reading setback is one of the important factors contributing to the reading achievement gap between rich and poor children.

- There is powerful evidence indicating that children from lower-income families have more restricted access to books, both in school and out of school, than do their more-advantaged peers.

- There is consistent correlational evidence illustrating that better readers read more than poorer readers, a finding that supports theoretical models that emphasize the importance of the volume of successful reading experiences in the development of reading proficiency.

- There is a substantial body of research linking successful school reading experiences with the motivation to read voluntarily; successful school reading experiences require a curriculum framework that emphasizes matching children with books appropriate to their level of reading development.

Given these findings, we can ask, What are the implications for current education reform initiatives that seek to eliminate the reading achievement gap between rich children and poor children?

RESEARCH-GUIDED REFORM PRINCIPLES

There are at least two broad principles to be drawn from this research that might guide education reform efforts focused on closing the reading achievement gap.

1. *Volume of reading is important in the development of reading proficiency.* Does the reform design ensure that all students engage in extensive, high-success reading activities throughout the school day? Does it reliably enhance the volume of voluntary reading that students do — in the evenings, on the weekends, and during summer vacations?

2. *Children must have easy — literally fingertip — access to books that provide engaging, successful reading experiences throughout the calendar year if we want them to read in volume.* Does the reform design provide classroom book collections so that all students, regardless of their achievement levels, have easy access to hundreds of titles of appropriately difficult books? Does it provide an array of books available to students every Friday for take-home weekend reading? Does the reform design ensure that books are easily available throughout the summer months? Does it provide teachers with the skills needed to match children and books?

Having set forth these two principles, we would further note that all children also need consistent access to explicit demonstrations of the thinking that proficient readers do before, during, and after reading.⁴³ In other words, they need access to expert instruction. We wish that children needed only to be given substantial blocks of time to read and easy access to appropriate books to foster reading development, but they also need to be taught. Still, good teaching may go unrewarded if students do not practice those emerging skills and strategies successfully and extensively. It is during such successful, independent practice that students consolidate their skills and strategies and come to own them. Without extensive successful reading practice, reading proficiency inevitably lags.

If current education reform efforts are to be successful in narrowing the reading achievement gap, the intervention designs must reflect the scientific research available. Children need an enormous supply of successful reading experiences, both in school and out, to become proficient, independent readers. The potential role of voluntary summer reading in closing the reading achievement gap has been neglected too long by educators, researchers, and policy makers. Schools that serve many poor children must play a substantive role in ensuring that each and every child has year-round access to appropriate books to read, books that they cannot wait to read.

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