

## Got Books?

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**A new study suggests that increasing summer reading can help prevent low-income children from losing ground during vacation.**

When Devon started 3rd grade as a new transfer student at inner-city Jefferson Elementary School,<sup>1</sup> he was reading at a 1st grade level. A quiet boy with a shy smile, he appeared eager to try. But he struggled with the sounds of letters and became confused and frustrated when invited to read aloud. Fortunately, Jefferson's dedicated staff had put comprehensive supports in place to help students like Devon. With accurate and frequent assessments to pinpoint his strengths and weaknesses, exposure to rich and varied reading materials, after-school tutoring, and targeted instruction to develop early reading strategies, Devon gained confidence and was almost on grade level by the end of school in June. His teachers, resource specialists, and tutors believed that he was on track to academic success.

Imagine their dismay the following September when Devon, now entering 4th grade, seemed to have forgotten many of his hard-won skills. Beginning-of-the-year assessments placed him back in the lowest reading group, and the round of interventions began again. But this year, Devon felt less hopeful.

Sadly, Devon is typical of many low-income students who make great strides during the school year only to see their gains slip away over the summer break. Their teachers, who might work heroically to help them succeed, are often unfairly blamed for the stubborn achievement gap between these students and their wealthier peers.

## Access to Books Is the Key

Although education policymakers have done little to address this problem, a long history of research has shown that summer reading setback is a primary source of the reading achievement gap. For example, both Hayes and Grether (1983) and, more recently, Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson (2007) reported that summer setback explains approximately 80 percent of the reading achievement gap between poor and nonpoor students at age 14.

Other researchers have examined the factors that contribute to summer setback and have found that it can largely be explained by the lack of summer reading activity. As Heyns (1978) reported, "The single summer activity that is most strongly and consistently related to summer learning is reading" (p. 161). More recently, Kim (2004) found that summer reading activity stemmed summer setback in a sample of 6th grade students in an urban school system.

Students from low-income families are likely to have more restricted access to reading material at home than their more-advantaged peers do. Research confirms enormous discrepancies in the numbers of books in the homes of poor and nonpoor children (Constantino, 2005; Fryer & Levitt, 2002; Neuman, Celano, Greco, & Shue, 2001). Neuman and Celano (2001) found roughly 10 times greater access to reading material in higher-income neighborhoods than in lower-income neighborhoods in the same large urban center.

Research supports the commonsense notion that easier access to interesting reading materials increases the likelihood that people will read. Both Kim (2004) and McQuillan and Au (2001), for example, found that easy availability of reading material strongly predicts the amount of reading activity.

## More Research Evidence

Increasing low-income students' access to books during the summer months seems likely to stimulate reading activity and thereby minimize summer reading loss. Heyns (1978) first raised this hypothesis when she wrote, "the unique contribution of reading to summer learning suggests that increasing access to books and encouraging reading may

well have a substantial impact on achievement" (p. 172). In the 30 years since then, however, this idea has received little attention from researchers or policymakers.

Recently, two large-scale randomized field experiments have supported the hypotheses that (1) providing low-income students with easy access to appropriate books would increase the amount of summer reading and (2) increasing the amount of reading would ameliorate summer reading setback. First, Kim (2006) reported on a single summer intervention that provided 252 randomly selected low-income 4th graders in 10 schools with books to read during the summer months. Each student received eight books, which were mailed to him or her every other week during July and August along with a postcard encouraging the student to practice reading both out loud and silently. The students' teachers also instructed them in comprehension strategies and paired reading during the last two weeks of school. The study found small positive effects on reading achievement as measured by the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills when these students were compared with a control group. Gains were especially evident among African American students.

From 2001 to 2004, we conducted a similar study but with a larger sample of students and a longitudinal design (Allington et al., 2007). We provided 12 paperback books each summer to 842 randomly selected primary-grade students eligible for free or reduced-price meals in 17 high-poverty elementary schools. The books were self-selected by the students at book fairs we organized over three consecutive years.

Although the students were overwhelmingly African American, they generally chose books that reflected everyday popular culture rather than books related to African American issues. The top choices of both boys and girls were related to the media—*Hangin' with Hilary Duff*, *Hangin' with Lil' Romeo*, and so on. The Captain Underpants series was also popular. When students did select literature representing the experiences of African Americans, they reported doing so because their teachers had earlier introduced the book to them.

On the final day of school each year, the students were given the books they had selected. We asked the students to keep a book log and return it at the end of the summer (although few did so).

After three years of participation, we compared the reading achievement (as measured by scores on Florida's Comprehensive Assessment Test) of the experimental group with a control group of 428 low-income students from the same schools who received no books. We found that the reading achievement of the students who received the summer books for three years was significantly higher ( $p = .015$ ) than that of the control-group students. We calculated an overall reading achievement effect size of .14, which was statistically significant, and a slightly larger effect size ( $ES = .21$ ) for the poorest students. Both of these effect sizes are small. However, both are equivalent to or larger than the effect size Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsay, and Greathouse (1996) reported for attending summer school ( $ES = .14$ ) and equal to or larger than the achievement effect sizes Borman, Hewes, Overman, and Brown (2003) reported for implementing comprehensive school reform models ( $ES = .09-.14$ ). Our intervention was less expensive and less extensive than either providing summer school or engaging in comprehensive school reform.

In addition to the positive effects of reading achievement, the students also told us that they liked the opportunity to select their own books at the book fair. Sean, a 3rd grader, told us, "I think the book fair was great. I like it when we pick our own books to read. 'Cause some books other people pick, when you start reading, it's stupid." If we want students to read voluntarily, then offering them the opportunity to select the books seems to be a crucial factor.

We also received some input from parents in the form of written notes in the book logs that we asked students to return. Sometimes parents noted that the books seemed easy or hard or that the students and their siblings appreciated receiving them. Although we rarely got more than a sentence or two from parents or students, there were exceptions. For instance, one mother wrote about Ruby Bridges's book *Through My Eyes*, a firsthand account of early school desegregation,

My son didn't want to read this book. I started reading the book. It didn't hold his attention. But later he asked me some questions. "What is racism? Are we African Americans? Mom,

why did they write a story about Ruby Bridges and who is she?" We are going to keep this book on our bookshelf so every year we can pull it out and read it again and have a discussion on it. So the older they get the more they will be able to understand civil rights and other topics, and why Ruby Bridges's life story was important.

## Getting Books into Students' Hands

To become skilled at almost any activity requires extensive and continual practice, whether the skills are physical or cognitive in nature. Just as an athlete's performance diminishes during the off-season if he or she practices less, students' reading performance falls off during the summer months if they don't read.

These two studies strongly suggest one way to begin to address the long-standing reading achievement gap between low-income students and their more-affluent peers. Too many students, especially poor students, spend their summers with restricted access to books that might engage them in reading. Although many aspects of the way students spend their summer breaks are beyond the control of schools, we can do something about the lack of access to reading materials if we have the will to do so. For example, schools might

- Rethink access to school book collections. School libraries are typically the largest and nearest supply of age-appropriate books for low-income students, but in too many cases there is no access to school and classroom libraries during summer vacation.
- Revisit the school budget to create programs similar to our experimental intervention, routinely sending students home for the summer with a collection of self-selected books.
- Acknowledge the role of popular culture in students' lives. Rather than denigrating series books or books that derive from movies or video games, build on this prior knowledge to create communities of readers who share, discuss, and swap favorite books.
- Identify local knowledge. Children and families in particular communities know a lot about some animals or habitats. For example, our informational books in Florida focused on alligators and swamps in one community and sharks and oceans in another, building on students' interests and background knowledge.

We must create ways to put books into all students' hands during the summer months—and other school vacation periods as well. Ensuring that books are available to any child at any time of the year will be a good first step in enhancing the reading achievement of low-income students and an absolutely necessary step in closing the reading achievement gap.

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#### Endnote

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