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Public Library Summer Reading Programs Contribute to Reading Progress and Proficiency

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Evidence Summary

Public Library Summer Reading Programs Contribute to Reading Progress and Proficiency

A Review of:

Roman, S., & Fiore, C. (2010). Do public library summer reading programs close the achievement gap? *Children and Libraries*, (Winter), 27-31.

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Abstract

Objectives – To explore summer reading partnerships between public libraries and school libraries, and the impact on student achievement in reading.

Design – The design is mixed methods: tests, interviews and surveys.

Setting – Eleven US sites involving school and public library partners.

Subjects – A total of 357 elementary school students entering fourth grade that met specific criteria. Parents, teachers, school librarians and public librarians were also included.

Methods – This study occurred over a three year period from 2006-2009. It was developed as a partnership between Dominican University, the Colorado State Library Agency and the Texas Library and Archives Commission. Additionally, the Center for Summer Learning at Johns Hopkins University was contracted to conduct the research. It was designed to explore the research question central to a 1978 study by Barbara Heyns.

An advisory committee, with representatives from each partner agency, developed evaluation questions and established the objective selection criteria for participants in the study. The criteria included: at least 50% of students qualifying for free and reduced price

meals; at least 85 percent of school population would take the reading proficiency test in English; public library summer reading programs with a minimum of six weeks of programming; a history of collaboration between the paired school and public library applicants; both school and public library would sign a partnership agreement and participate in conference calls.

In spring of 2008, students at participating sites were given a pre-test using the Scholastic Reading Inventory, and also provided with special summer reading logs developed for the study, to be used during their subsequent participation in the public library summer reading programs.

In fall of 2008, the same children were tested on the Scholastic Reading Inventory. In addition, surveys of students, parents, teachers and library staff were administered, as well as a structured interview of library staff.

Main Results – The students who participated in the public library summer reading program did not experience summer loss in reading as measured by the post test administered in their schools.

The researchers note patterns in the demographics of students who chose to participate (participation was self-selected and voluntary): predominantly Caucasian girls above poverty level, who generally scored well on reading tests. Those who participated in the study also used libraries, had more books in their homes, and parents who used libraries and provided literacy activities at home.

Teachers found that students who participated in the program started the school year ready to learn, had improved reading achievement and displayed stronger motivation, enjoyment and confidence in reading. Parents of students who participated in the program also strongly agreed that their children were better prepared to begin the school year.

Conclusion – The results from this study confirmed findings from an earlier study (Heyns, 1978) and subsequent related research

that summer reading programs in public libraries can contribute to maintaining reading progress and proficiency, and that the recreational reading that is available to all students regardless of socioeconomic status through the public library can make a difference in reading scores.

In this article the researchers presented results and conclusions based on selected subsets of the results in the full study. The participants were self-reported and no control group was established.

The researchers also use the results of the study as a starting point to provide a call to action that highlights the value of public library summer reading programs, and the need for the education community to invest in partnerships with public libraries, particularly in communities that serve children and families in low-economic or depressed areas. They also note the need to include parents and grandparents in outreach efforts.

Commentary

While there is significant research to support the value of public libraries in teaching children to read – not as instructional supports, but to provide the vitally important recreational reading that helps children develop as engaged readers – the education community has been slow to focus on the value of partnerships between school and public libraries. Public libraries provide support for independent reading that builds on the instructional role of the school and classroom teachers, and augments the school library collections, particularly during the summer months.

The authors' methodology was designed to measure the effect of summer reading programs on at-risk students, but, by the description of the participants and actual data collected, it is not clear whether they were able to achieve this goal since it appears that the majority of actual participants were not at-risk students. The authors did, however, translate the entirety of the research to a call for action

that encompasses the potential value of collaborative efforts between agencies and is applicability across several states.

Previous research has consistently shown that pleasurable reading builds fluency and confidence, and children who enjoy reading a wide variety of materials are likely to have higher scores on reading achievement tests (Krashen, 2004). Particularly for disadvantaged children, the availability of public library reading materials and the support of summer reading programs may help combat the long-term educational consequences (lower achievement in all areas) that result from cumulative effects of summer learning loss. The value of public libraries summer reading programs has been well documented (Allington, et.al, 2010; Gordon, 2008; Gordon & Lu, 2008) and this study supports the view that partnerships between schools and public libraries can provide significant support for children from all socioeconomic groups in establishing and maintaining consistent progress in learning to read.

The final section, the call to action, outlines specific strategies that can be implemented in daily practice to capitalize on the findings of this study.

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