

Eliminating Summer Reading Setback: How We Can Close the Rich/Poor Reading Achievement Gap

..... by Richard L. Allington and Anne McGill-Franzen

Schools across the U.S. have been attempting to address the rich/poor reading achievement gap, which, by 12th grade, is a four-year gap with students from low-income families achieving the same reading performance levels as middle class students in eighth grade. The common theme of the various initiatives for addressing the rich/poor gap has been to focus on improving the quality of reading instruction in schools serving students from low-income families.

The most recent federal effort was Reading First, an initiative that focused on altering teaching in ways that the federal advisors thought would improve achievement in schools serving low-income children. Unfortunately, that federal effort failed to close the rich/poor achievement gap (Gamse et al., 2009).

What surprises us, however, is that no federal agency has exhibited much concern, if any, about summer reading setback. What is clear is that most (80%) of the rich/poor achievement gap comes from summer setback (Alexander et al., 2007; Hayes & Grether, 1983). That is, much of the rich/poor gap accumulates during the summer months when school is not in session.

Contrary to popular perceptions, it is not simply that children from low-income families attend ineffective schools, but rather that poor children's achievement falls behind during summers when schools are not in session. Without books, poor children rarely read during the summers and their school-year achievement suffers a setback.

What the Studies Show

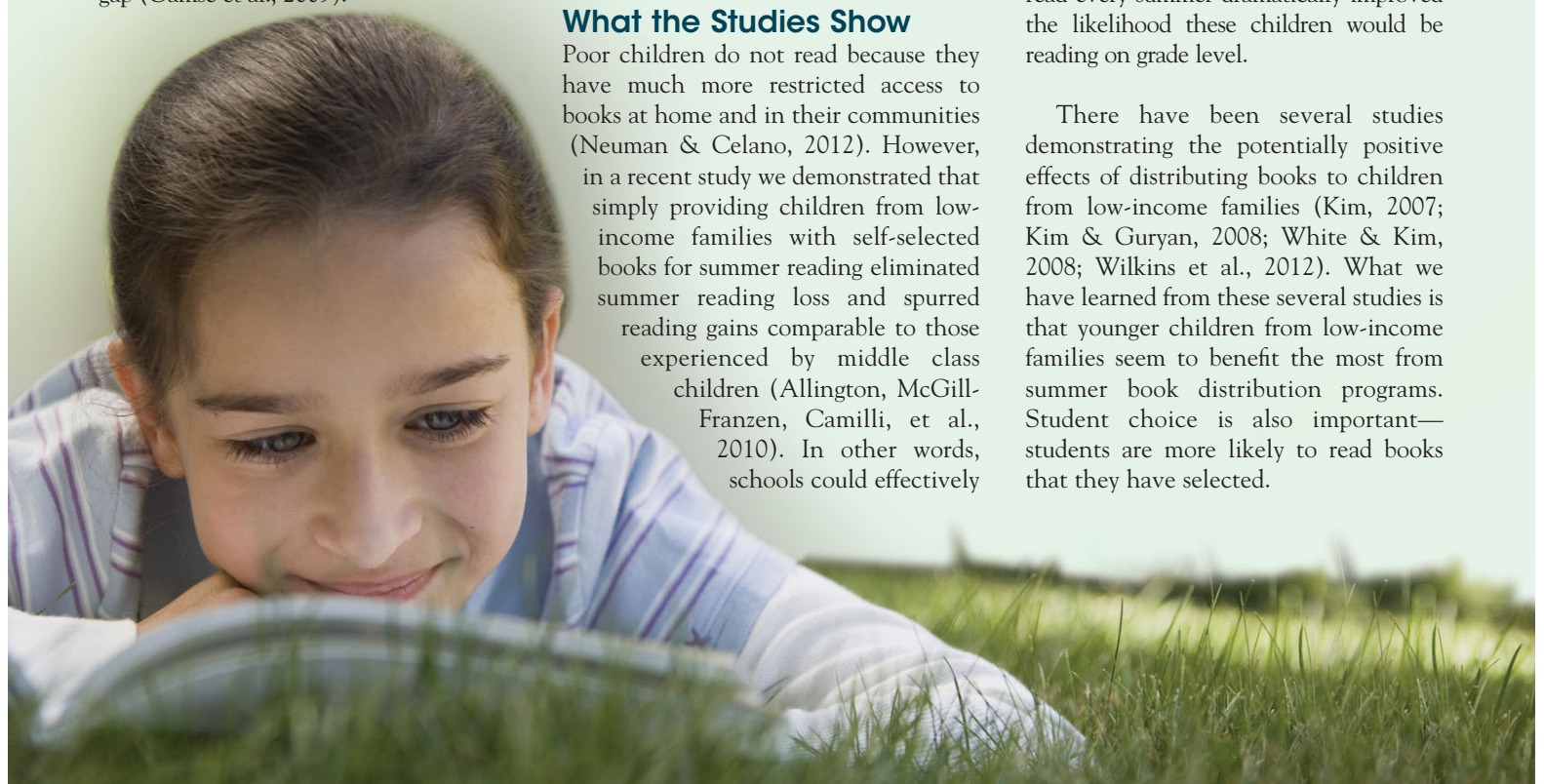
Poor children do not read because they have much more restricted access to books at home and in their communities (Neuman & Celano, 2012). However, in a recent study we demonstrated that simply providing children from low-income families with self-selected books for summer reading eliminated summer reading loss and spurred reading gains comparable to those experienced by middle class children (Allington, McGill-Franzen, Camilli, et al., 2010). In other words, schools could effectively

address summer reading setback at low cost, but few schools do.

Our study demonstrated that distributing self-selected books for summer reading improved reading achievement as much as attending summer school! Ending summer setback over a three-year period improved reading achievement by roughly a half-year between grades 1 and 4, the grades we studied (Coalition for Evidence-Based Policy, 2011).

The effects of our study were twice as large for the children from the lowest-income families (McGill-Franzen & Allington, 2008). This was not surprising because it is these children who are the least likely to own books of their own. Giving them books that they wanted to read every summer dramatically improved the likelihood these children would be reading on grade level.

There have been several studies demonstrating the potentially positive effects of distributing books to children from low-income families (Kim, 2007; Kim & Guryan, 2008; White & Kim, 2008; Wilkins et al., 2012). What we have learned from these several studies is that younger children from low-income families seem to benefit the most from summer book distribution programs. Student choice is also important—students are more likely to read books that they have selected.



Recommendations for a Summer Books Project

For readers who are interested in promoting summer reading, we make several recommendations based on the research done so far. Summer reading programs most likely to ameliorate the summer reading loss have the following features:

- Target younger students, focusing on K and 1st grade students.
- Encourage self-selection of books by students using a book fair model.
- Develop longer-term summer books projects since the evidence suggests annual distributions of at least three years.
- Distribute different numbers of books following the general model that younger students need more books. In our study we distributed 12–15 books to each child (Grades 1 to 4) involved. Other research suggests as few as five or six books will be sufficient for 6th graders (Kim, 2004).

In the end we can continue to ignore summer reading setback and continue to observe the rich/poor reading achievement gap. Or we could decide to attend to the problems that summer reading setback creates. If we choose the latter, then the evidence suggests that summer distribution of books is one potentially powerful initiative that schools should consider.

Conclusion

Summer reading setback has been well established as a major contributor to the rich/poor reading achievement gap. Although well established, the research has been largely ignored by schools as well as by state and federal agencies. The evidence available suggests that the limited access that children from low-income families have to books lies at the base of the summer reading setback. The evidence also suggests that providing children from low-income families with self-selected books to read during the summer is an effective strategy for addressing the problems of summer reading loss.

An annual cost of approximately \$50 per child for the summer book

distribution program is far less expensive than scheduling summer school programs and equally effective at enhancing the reading achievement of children from low-income families.

The choice is ours and the children are waiting for us to decide.



Richard L. Allington **Anne McGill-Franzen**

Richard Allington, Ph.D. is a professor of education at the University of Tennessee, and **Anne McGill-Franzen, Ph.D.** is a professor and director of the Reading Center at the University of Tennessee.

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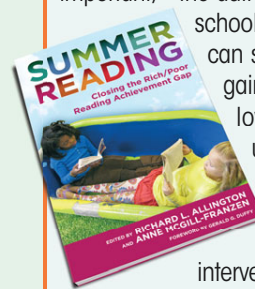
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Summer Reading Closing the Rich/Poor Reading Achievement Gap

**Richard L. Allington and
Anne McGill-Franzen, editors**

Written by acknowledged experts and researchers on reading, remedial reading, and special education, this collection describes multiple models of innovative summer reading and book distribution initiatives. It also provides research-based guidelines for planning a successful summer reading program, including tips on book selection, distribution methods, and direction for crucial follow-up. Most important, the authors clearly show how schools and communities can see greater academic gains for students from low-income families using the methods described in this book than from much more costly interventions.



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