"Do Summer Reading Programs Prevent Regression in Literacy in Primary Age Students?"

Amanda Kent
St. John Fisher College

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Abstract
When school lets out for summer students are excited for their break from school, but do not realize the damage they are doing to their learning. For students labeled at-risk the damage done over the summer months can mean using valuable time in the next grade re-teaching all that was lost. Teachers can spend the first months catching the students up before being able to move onto new material, putting them again behind their grade level. One solution to this regression is summer reading programs. This paper will compare literature on this topic, giving many insights into difference aspects of these programs. It will also provide the results of a research project done to prove the benefit of these summer reading programs.

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St. John Fisher College

Capstone Project
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This paper will compare literature on this topic, giving many insights into difference aspects of these programs. It will also provide the results of a research project done to prove the benefit of these summer reading programs.
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Introduction

At the primary level many students who are considered at risk, students reading below grade level, receive reading support services on a daily basis. Once the school year is over the child’s parent(s) have the option to send the child to a summer reading program to help prevent regression in the child’s reading level over the summer. Due to what appears to be a lack of knowledge the parent(s) may chose not to send the child to this program not realizing the regression this may cause. Parents with an understanding of the benefit that summer reading programs can provide may change their minds and send their children to these programs. Summer reading programs may not be able to ensure improvement in levels, but at minimum should be able to ensure maintenance of the child’s end of the year reading level. The maintenance of a child’s reading level would prevent time lost in the next grade level going back and making up for regression made over the summer months. Preventing that regression would allow the following teacher to keep those at risk children as close to grade level as possible, possibly getting them to grade level in a timely manner. Reading at or above grade level will help the children in countless subjects through out their school day and career. Many factors go into summer programs such as cost, length, and curriculum. Summer reading programs are often referred to by various names such as summer reading programs, summer school, or summer literacy camp.

As a result of the regression stated above I came up with my goal for this research project.

- To explore and define the regression of at risk students not attending summer reading programs along with the maintenance or improvement of at risk students
attending summer reading programs.

The discovery of this will allow teachers to give informed research results to parents of at-risk students making the decision to send their child to a summer reading program.
Summer Reading Programs

Literature Review

Purpose

Many students long for their summer vacation. However, what most students and parents do not realize is the loss of skills gained from the previous school year. It has been shown, according to the Center for Summer Learning at Johns Hopkins University, that taking too long a break from traditional classroom study can lead to what’s been called summer learning loss. Average students who break for summer lose more than two and a half months of math skills from the previous year (News & Notes, 2007).

The Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) states that their research shows students slide back over summer break. This program consisted of a 15-day intervention of at risk first through eighth graders, where students worked in small groups for 5 ½ hours focusing on reading, writing, and math skill development. In the fall of 2005, MEAP results indicated improvements in just about every summer school student’s performance by at least one level (Jackson, 2007). The MEAP results conclude that at risk students need summer intervention to continue their academic development.

Research from Scotland indicates that all students regardless of their upbringing tend to lose math skills during the summer months. With regards to reading, disadvantaged children tend to experience a slight decline during the summer compared to more advantaged children (Scottish Daily Record, 2007). While students who struggle during the school year would benefit from a summer reading program the most, all students should take advantage of these types of programs due to summer learning loss.

Because most students who enter summer reading programs have either a deficiency in skills or motivation, traditional education methodology will not be as
effective. Summer schools use a different curriculum in the summer because the traditional curriculum clearly didn’t work well enough for students who need summer school (Kever, 2007). If teachers want to be effective they have to find a way to reach and teach these children. These learners need to be shown the value of practicing the necessary skills over summer months just as an athlete would continue to practice all year long.

According to Mr. Fairchild, executive director of the Center for Summer Learning at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, if students aren’t engaged in ongoing learning activities, they lose ground academically. He also states that everyone would expect an athlete’s or a musician’s performance to suffer if they didn’t practice, and the same is true for our nation’s young people (News & Notes, 2007).

Cost

Title I funds are used by more than 50,000 public schools across the country to provide supplementary academic support and learning opportunities to help at risk children succeed in challenging programs and meet state standards in core academic subjects. Title I funds are determined by the poverty rates of the students in the district. These funds help support extra instruction in reading and mathematics, as well as special preschool, after-school, and summer programs to extend and reinforce the regular school curriculum (www.ed.gov/programs/titleiparta/index.htm, 2007).

Even with Title I funds, elementary schools in the Coeur d’Alene and Lakeland districts in Washington don’t have their regular summer school options this year. The superintendents of these districts decided the programs weren’t worth the cost because
they would have to pick up the additional funding (Cuniff, 2007). The cost for these districts was roughly $15 per child (Cuniff, 2007).

In Indiana, summer funding is determined by statewide enrollment projections. The expected projection for 2007-2008 is calculated in May of the previous school year and is anticipated to be $18,360,000 (Kauffman, 2007). When the projected state funding runs out of money, the additional support comes from: remediation money, the Monroe County Community School Corporation’s summer school budget, and transportation dollars (Kauffman, 2007). This state funding only covers the teacher’s salaries, not benefits, transportation or anything associated with schooling (Kauffman, 2007).

**Program Variations**

Unfortunately there is no one size fits all program when it comes to curriculums and students. This is true for the traditional school year and also true for summer school programs. Curriculum Advantage, Inc has created a summer school program that is already being utilized in many states across the United States called Classworks (Business Wire, 2007).

Classworks is a network based system of K-12 reading and mathematics curriculum and learning tools that currently comprise over 5,000 hours of curriculum. This program is installed in over 3,000 schools nationwide (Business Wire, 2007). Classworks is aligned to national and perspective state learning standards and state tests. This curriculum includes prescriptive and summative assessment, remediation and reporting tools (Business Wire, 2007).

Advantages to Classworks include student’s ability to work at their own pace and forget the feeling of pressure brought on by traditional letter or numeric grading systems.
By not having the pressure of grades or the watchful eye of No Child Left Behind, student's performance actually cultivates (Business Wire, 2007). With the alleviation of stress students are able to take pleasure in their own learning. These summer literacy camps focus on making literacy fun for primary students who need extra support in learning to read (Lloyd, 2007).

Another example of a summer school program can be seen at the Boise School District in Idaho. The curriculum offered to K-3 students has a heavy emphasis on improving their reading skills along with math and more hands on activities such as art and physical education. This service is offered over half days and allows students time to get the needed one-to-one attention from educators, and achieve their educational goals. The Boise School District believes that summer school can be an option for students to get the extra help they need whether it be to fulfill graduation requirements or to get a head start before fall (Targeted News Service, 2007).

With the amount of summer school programs nationwide, various programs and types of programs exist to meet the needs of their districts. For example, the Winston-Salem and Forsyth County School Districts in North Carolina, offers three hour sessions for 15 days (Deaver, 2007). The Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP) meets for four days a week, five and a half hour days (Jackson, 2007). In Illinois they offer an intensive 90 hour program of concentrated literacy instruction over a period of 23 days (Wells, 2007). Transportation is provided for the majority of these programs (Dyal, 2007). Although these programs may vary the ultimate goal of each program along with each district is the same; the betterment of a child’s learning ability.
Benefits

Throughout a traditional school year teachers make an effort to engage their students on a daily basis. Unfortunately teachers also know that touching upon each child’s specific learning style each day can pose a challenge when you have upwards of twenty students per classroom. A key benefit to summer reading programs is the small class sizes. Because class sizes at summer school are smaller and tailored to suit specific individual’s interests, it can have a huge effect on the children’s ability to learn, and boost their confidence as learners in the long term (Scottish Daily Record, 2007).

Confidence can vastly affect a child’s ability to learn and be successful in school.

Another benefit to summer school is that summer school programs have proven to give students more confidence in the classroom (Jackson, 2007). The individualized attention along with allowing students to learn in a way they are comfortable makes a huge difference in the confidence level of a student and their learning ability.

The more students present in a classroom the less individualized time each child receives from their teacher. Small groups can be crucial for students who may feel anxiety by large group sizes of the traditional school year. Students, who feel overwhelmed in the school year, can thrive in the small group setting of the summer school (Jackson, 2007). It is the goal of most programs to have students learning in groups as small as three or four; making the individual attention tremendous (Rodriguez, 2007). Giving students a feeling of confidence in the classroom allows for even more of an opportunity to experience the benefit of summer school programs.

Having the opportunity to think of and explore new ideas, meet new people, work as a team, express themselves and try out things they did not think possible can give
students the motivation they have been looking for to drive their learning (Scottish Daily Record, 2007). The traditional school year can be full of stress and anxiety for many students. The smaller class sizes give them the opportunity to put this behind them and enjoy their learning experience if only for a few weeks.

Students can achieve confidence in their learning easier if they are learning in their preferred learning mode or style. Many times students in summer school can learn through hands on activities that typically may not be done in the larger class setting of the traditional school year. The smaller class sizes make it easier to do projects and other hands on learning exercises (Kever, 2007).

As a student, imagine how much easier it would be to go to school on the first day with a new found confidence in your learning and the motivation to succeed and the knowledge that you can succeed. Research has shown that summer school programs lead to improved school work on returning to the classroom in the fall (Scottish Daily Record, 2007).

**Limitations**

As stated above many summer school programs are a work in progress. When the summer school programs began and before they became more individualized, parents would complain that summer school had not done enough (Rodriguez, 2007). Parents wanted to see more improvement and excitement in their child if they were going to send them to school over the summer months.

Taking in criticism from parents, students, and staff, summer programs have begun to change their programs in order to make it more efficient. They received criticism in many areas of the program; one of them being class size. Summer school
programs did not start out with smaller class and group sizes, but soon realized that they needed to be smaller for the more individualized attention each student needs (Rodriguez, 2007).

There is an obstacle that is placed on programs out of their control; funding. The Winston-Salem/Forsyth County School Districts have to charge students a fee to help pay for summer school. They hope that this cost will help motivate students who want to learn to attend instead of keeping students away. In the past the districts would have students sign up and never attend the classes, taking a spot for a student who may have attended regularly and who wanted to learn over the summer (Deaver, 2007).

Another obstacle is student attendance. Over the summer families plan vacations or children sign up to attend a summer camp. If a summer reading program is only running for four weeks and the students has camp for one week and a vacation another attendance can become an issue (Cuniff, 2007). Students who do not attend the programs regularly are not receiving the full advantage of the program and will not show the improvement needed to prove that these programs do benefit the students.

Gathering valid data on summer school programs in order to compare data taken at the end of the year and beginning of the following year for students attending and not attending summer programs can prove difficult. Soar and Soar (1969) attempted to study loss over summer by comparing elementary students in the fall and spring of two consecutive years. Although gains in academics were present in students who did not attend a summer program spring assessments were administered a month before instruction had ended for the year and not administered again until a month of instruction had occurred the following fall (Austin et al., 1972).
Attitude

The key to making summer programs beneficial for students over the summer months is engagement in their learning. Students need to be engaged to be motivated and to enjoy learning during their summer vacation. A ten-year-old at Lapwai Elementary School described his experience at summer school as fun and something that he did not want to miss (Walker, 2007). If teachers can engage students and make their learning fun, students will no longer see summer school as a punishment, but as fun and a place they want to go over the summer so that they do not miss out on learning something fun.

Teachers need to realize that engaging the students may take extra effort on their part. Activities that are planned need to be totally different than during the school year, so you really get the students engaged (Wells, 2007). Students are attending the summer reading program for many reasons, one of which may be that they were not engaged during the traditional school year and did not apply themselves to the learning. Summer reading programs are a place for students to get the individualized attention they need to build their excitement for learning and confidence in their learning through non-traditional teaching strategies.

Alternate teaching strategies allow for alternate learning strategies. Students are enabled to tap into their preferred learning style allowing them to be the driving force in their own learning. Students who are driving their own learning seem determined to improve their performance (Gonen, 2007). The learning attitudes of the students can be linked to the attitude of the teacher. The more the teacher can take on the facilitating role the more independent learning will occur.
According to a student at Morris Intermediate School summer school is better than regular school because the teachers that participate like what they’re doing, and in this setting they help students more (Gonen, 2007). Teachers in summer school programs apply for the ability to teach summer programs, they are not forced to. Giving the teachers the choice to teach the program and not is another benefit to the students. It is obvious to students if their teacher wants to be there and is engaged in the learning and they will take their attitude from the teacher in the room.

Any and all programs do not start off with immediate success. The same holds true for summer school programs. Summer school programs are a work in progress. If school districts can adopt the attitude that summer school programs should be a top priority because learning should be the constant and time should be the variable then programs will only continue to grow more beneficial to students over their vacation months (Rodriguez, 2007). If boys and girls can be eager to learn over their summer vacation why would anyone ever deny them of that excitement and motivation for learning?

Methodology

Participants of this study were boys and girls attending public school in upstate New York. They were students entering third grade in the fall of 2007. The researcher collected end of the year reading levels from all students with consent to participate in the study by administering a DRA (Diagnostic Reading Assessment) or Running Reading Record (RRR). After this information was collected and sorted into two groups: students attending the summer reading program and students not attending the summer reading program; the researcher then followed students attending by administering weekly RRR
to uncover any improvements, maintenance, or regression in their reading levels. At the end of the four week reading program the researcher administered another DRA or RRR and gathered a final reading level for the summer. Before comparing all results the researcher contacted the parent or legal guardian for the students who have consented to participate, but did not attend the summer reading program. The researcher set up a time to meet with their child (and them) at the most convenient location and administered another DRA or RRR and gathered their end of the summer reading level. Once the researcher had results for both study groups she then analyzed the results looking for any patterns in level improvement, maintenance, or regression for students attending and not attending summer reading programs. The researcher then related this information to the literature that has been read and compared relating to this topic.

**Findings and Discussion**

As a result of data collection and analysis summer reading programs, if taught in an effective manner, have proven beneficial to students. My researched showed that all students attending the summer reading program, four students, increased their reading level or maintained their end of the year reading level. The three students who chose not to attend the summer reading program all regressed in their reading level by at least one full level. Of the four students attending the summer reading program two of them managed to increase their reading level one level, while the other two maintained the level gathered at the end of the school year. The levels are based on their weekly Running Reading Records and a DRA (Diagnostic Reading Assessment) given at the end of the four week program. The program of no cost to the family, with transportation provided for four weeks, and three hours in duration with the focus on literacy, proved
effective. When entering the next grade level the students attending the program will be where they need to be while others who did not attend will lose learning time going back and making up lost reading skills.

The findings of my research were consistent with the literature read. The literature stated that students attending summer reading programs, where they are able to learn in small groups focusing on literacy, were able to maintain or improve their skills. The literature also stated that there is marked regression in students who leave a grade level labeled at risk. Both were reinforced by my research. Students attending at the very least maintained their reading level and students who did not attended showed marked regression in their reading level since the end of the school year.

Conclusions

Summer reading programs, though costly, are a proven benefit to students if they can be taught in small groups in ways that engaged students in their own learning. Summer is a great opportunity for teachers to stray from their natural teaching practices and create innovative and engaging activities for students to lift their motivation and confidence in learning. The motivation and confidence gained over the summer may carry into their upcoming school year and allow them to succeed in ways they may not have in the past.

At early ages, such as primary, students develop their love for learning or their lack of love for learning. If they can be shown that learning is fun and that they can be successful they will hopefully become life long learners. If at that age students can be kept on track in their academics and at grade level they will not have to feel unsuccessful, even if that means they attend school over their summer vacation. Summer is a great
opportunity to learn stress free; free from assessments and free from the data that can drive a traditional school year.

In conclusion, benefits are proven from summer reading programs. Like anything else there is a cost, but how do you put a price on a child’s ability to continue to learn and grow as a person? Who are we to say that it cost too much to educate a child over the summer months? It would seem that any child attending summer school who leaves the programs having learned or maintained their levels, who has gained motivation, and now has confidence that they did not have before would make these summer programs priceless.

**Recommendations**

Based on this research summer reading programs are beneficial to students over the summer months. They can be especially crucial to students whom we label at risk; students just meeting benchmark with support and students not making benchmarks at the end of each school year. Students need programs that engaged them in literacy while at the same time making learning fun over the summer months. Students do not need to use their entire summer vacation to benefit from the summer reading programs. This researched showed proven results in one four week program. Financial issues aside, summer reading programs are a beneficial learning experience for students at risk and should become a regular part of student learning over the summer.
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