



Literature Review on the Impact of Summer Reading Clubs

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Literature Review Findings

This section describes the results of the literature review. The purpose of the review is to examine past research on the effectiveness of library summer reading programs in terms of reading proficiency, amount of reading, and reading enjoyment. Research findings with respect to children's self confidence, library use, and impact on families was also summarized.

A brief overview of library summer reading programs and children's reading and literacy development is provided prior to the research review.

Library Summer Reading Programs

Library summer reading programs utilize a variety of techniques to encourage reading, such as reading games or challenges, discussions of books, book related crafts, author visits, storytelling, rewards and incentives for reading, and more. A child's reading may be recorded on a record or game sheet or via other means. Moffat (2004) noted in her evaluation of the Hamilton Public Library's summer reading program that programs in North America typically operate along some kind of "read-and-report" structure where children respond to the book either verbally or in written format.

Many libraries across Canada offer summer reading programs. The TD Summer Reading Club, a program of national scope, now runs in three territories and eight provinces, supporting 432 public libraries in 2,518 localities and reaches approximately 230,000 children from 0 to 12 years old (Library and Archives Canada, 2005). While some public libraries continue to operate their own local reading clubs within participating areas of the TD program, public libraries in the non-participating provinces are involved in province-wide reading clubs. In British Columbia, over 70,000 children participate in a province-wide reading club. *Ready, Set...READ* is a reading program operating in New Brunswick Public Libraries in the summer. These programs typically have theme-based approaches, in-library activities for children, records of books read, high-quality reading kits and other incentives for reading during the summer months.

In the United Kingdom, *Chatterbooks*, while not a summer reading program, is a national network of reading groups for 4-12 year-olds and includes 3000 children. It is a partnership between a communications company, Orange, and the public library network. *Chatterbooks* serves as a model as to how business support can help libraries improve experiences for children (The Reading Agency, 2003). *The Summer Reading Challenge* is the largest UK reading program for 4-12 year-olds and is organised by The Reading Agency. It is delivered in public libraries each summer with a different theme each year. The program challenges children to read six books during the summer holidays. Activity sheets encourage responses to books through writing, drawing, and crafts. The children also receive stickers, posters, banners, bookmarks, and medals. While the United States does not have a national summer library reading program, there are a number of state-wide reading programs with many public libraries offering summer programs for children that include a variety of activities similar to those described above.

Children's Literacy in Canada

Reading is a complex activity that involves message getting and problem solving activities (Dolman, 2004). Reading is more than the translation of printed symbols and requires the construction of meaning from written text. Current definitions of literacy reflect the broad and multi-dimensional nature of literacy. Literacy has evolved from a basic ability to read and write to include peoples' ability to understand and use information as is illustrated in the following definition (used in the International Adult Literacy Survey):

Literacy is the ability to understand and use printed information in daily activities at home, at work and in the community - to achieve one's goals, and to develop one's knowledge and potential. (Willms, 2004, p. 6).

Given the multi-dimensional nature of literacy, the IALS developed three categories of literacy – prose, document and quantitative literacy (Willms, 2004, p.11)¹. In addition, they have developed five broad literacy levels from low literacy skills (level 1) to the highest levels (level 4 and 5), which are characterized by the ability to integrate several sources of information or solve more complex problems. Level 3 is considered the minimum desirable level in many countries, but some occupations require higher skills. Similarly, the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) has delineated five reading levels ranging from 1 to 5. Research generally supports that those people falling in the top two literacy levels are more likely to enrol in post-secondary education, and to have a higher socio-economic status.

The Programme for International Assessment (PISA) 2000 survey showed that 15-year-old students in Canada did well in comparison with other countries. “They ranked 2nd in reading, 6th in mathematics and 5th in science among 27 participating countries” (Willms, p.6). Despite this ranking, the IALS survey results showed a disproportionate number of Canadian youth continue to score at the low end of the literacy scales.

The PISA survey also found a large variation in literacy skills among Canadian provinces, with the mean literacy scores for the Atlantic Provinces below the Canadian average. The survey also found differences between females and males in their reading performance with females scoring about 30 points higher than males (this difference is equivalent to almost one year of schooling). Lower reading scores were also associated with parents' occupational status, and country of birth (with those born outside of Canada scoring on average 28 points lower²).

¹ Prose literacy: the ability to understand and use information from texts such as editorials, news stories, poems and fiction. Document literacy: the ability to locate and use information from documents such as job applications, payroll forms, transportation schedules, maps, tables and graphs. Quantitative literacy: the ability to perform arithmetic functions such as balancing a chequebook, calculating a tip, or completing an order form.

² However, it should also be noted that the literacy gap for those born outside Canada, decreases sharply during the first ten years that they are in the country.

Children's Reading and Literacy Development

A number of factors have been shown to relate to children's literacy development and school achievement. These include early exposure to language and literacy learning (Neuman, 1996 cited in Celano & Neuman; Anderson, 1995 cited in Celano & Neuman); level of parental involvement in reading activities (Jencks & Phillips, 1998 cited in Celano & Neuman); reading ability; the amount children read independently; and reading enjoyment.

Reading ability has been found to influence reading activity in children. Children with a history of below average reading abilities are less inclined to read voluntarily than those with more advanced reading competencies, (Guthrie & Anderson, 1999). The amount of time children spend reading books is also associated with reading achievement and with school achievement in general" (Celano & Neuman, 2001). Moreover, the amount children read independently is a good predictor of children's vocabulary and general knowledge differences (Cunningham and Stanovich, 1998 cited in Clark, Torsi & Strong, 2005).

One study conducted in Finland illustrates the interdependence between reading proficiency and reading habits in primary school-aged children. One hundred and ninety-five children were examined twice during their first primary school year and once during the spring term of Grade two. The results showed first, that children's reading skills predicted their reading habits: the more competent in reading children were at the end of Grade one, the more likely that were to engage in out-of-school reading one year later. Second, reading habits also predicted skills: the amount of out-of-school reading at the end of Grade one contributed to the development of reading performance (Leppanen, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2005).

The amount that children read for enjoyment and for school has been found to be a major contributor to reading achievement (Cox & Guthrie, 2001 cited in Clark, Torsi & Strong, 2005). Similarly, *The Reading for Change study by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development* found that reading enjoyment is closely associated with children's educational success regardless of their socio-economic status.

Summer Learning Loss

The review of literature indicates that overall students experience significant learning losses over the summer, most notably in the areas of reading and math, and that these losses add up over time to create a significant learning gap (Cooper, 1996). "Studies estimate that summer loss for all students equals about one month on a grade-level equivalent scale" (Cooper, 1996).

In his meta-analysis of 39 studies that examined the effects of summer holidays, Cooper (1996) found that summer reading learning loss was greater for kids from lower income families. For some measures of reading, middle-class children showed some small gains in reading over the summer. However, with respect to reading comprehension scores, the scores of both middle and lower income class children declined with the decline more pronounced for disadvantaged children.

Role of the Library

Libraries are well positioned to provide children with the opportunity to read more over the summer months, helping to address the problem of summer learning loss. In addition, libraries can serve to enhance children's enjoyment of reading. Celano & Neuman note that library programs for elementary school children play a role in addressing the problem of "aliteracy"; that is, being able to read, but lacking the motivation to do so.

Participants: Who Goes to Summer Reading Clubs?

In a survey of elementary and middle school children across six Canadian cities, Fasick, Gagnon, Howarth & Settington (2005) concluded that summer reading clubs generally attracted more frequent library users than infrequent users (43% versus 17%) and that the highest rate of enrolment across the survey sample was found among grade four girls in the Halifax, Hamilton, Toronto, and Vancouver areas. The lowest rate of enrolment of those sampled was among grade seven boys in the Montreal and Regina regions.

Ensuring that children have appropriate access to summer reading programs is a continuing challenge for libraries. For example, summer reading programs that operate during the workday may not be accessible to those households where both parents work. Libraries continue to develop strategies and to enhance efforts to improve their outreach and accessibility.

Effectiveness of Programs

Overall, evidence from literature indicates that summer reading clubs have a positive impact on children, parents, libraries and communities.

Impact on Reading Performance

A review of literature³ provided evidence that summer reading clubs were effective tools for keeping summer learning loss at bay and improving children's reading performance (Howes, 1986 cited in Moffat, 2004; Carter, 1988; Celano & Neuman, 2001; Evaluation and Training Institute; Product Perceptions Ltd., 2003; Markey cited in Moffat, 2004; Dolman, 2004). Moreover, there is some evidence to suggest that children who participate in these summer programs maintain or improve their reading regardless of age, gender or socio-economic status (Moffat, 2004).

Survey data on reading performance generally shows that the majority of reading club participants, librarians and parents believe that summer reading programs result in improved reading performance. For example, in a survey of children participating in the Summer Reading Challenge in the United Kingdom, 78 percent reported that their reading had improved as a result of taking the challenge (Product Perceptions Ltd., 2003). In an evaluation of the library summer reading program in Los Angeles County, teachers reported on over 900 participating and non-

³ While many of the studies were correlational in nature some have used comparative methodologies and pre / post tests.

participating students. With respect to reading skills, teachers reported that a higher percentage of the summer reading participants versus the non-participating students performed at or above grade level in: word recognition, reading vocabulary and reading comprehension. Student perceptions concurred with teacher reports, with the greater majority reporting that their reading had improved as a result of their participation in the program. (Evaluation and Training Institute, 2001).

Studies that have employed pre and post tests and/or comparative methodologies have also shown some promising results. For example, a research study (Dolman, 2004) of a Canadian Public Library Summer Reading Game⁴ administered a pre and post reading test to participants. The majority of reading game participants (79%) improved or at least maintained their reading levels over the summer vacation months⁵. Kupetz (cited in Celano & Neuman, 2001) found that children participating in library outreach literacy programs demonstrated better reading skills (e.g. read significantly more words correctly) than did the control group. An American study (Howes, 1986 cited in Moffat) utilizing a pre/post test control group design, found that children who participated in the library summer reading club improved their vocabulary and comprehension scores on the post tests, while non-participant scores typically decreased.

In another American study (Celano & Neuman, 2001) the reading performance of children attending the library summer reading club and children attending day camps (with no reading activities) was compared. These groups were comparable in terms of gender, ethnic and economic characteristics. The study found that children attending the library summer reading programs read nearly at their grade level, while children attending the camp programs read further below their grade level. “Even if children only come for short periods, those who attend summer library programs read at a higher level than those who do not come at all” (p.43). Children attending the library program also performed better on the Author Recognition Test, recognizing more authors and titles as compared to the control group. The study concluded that children’s time spent in the library enhances their reading achievement.

Similarly, in an earlier American study, comparison of reading tests scores of participants and non-participants were higher for participants of the Illinois library summer reading programs. This study also found that the number of books read in the summer was not as important a factor as enrolment in a summer reading program (Carter, 1988).

Impact on Amount of Reading

There is evidence to suggest that library summer reading programs contribute to increased reading and reading more widely (Reading Agency, 2003; Evaluation and Training Institute, 2001; Product Perceptions Ltd., 2003; Fasick et.al., 2005). In a survey of librarians involved in

⁴ The St. Albert Public Library (Edmonton, Alberta) has delivered a theme-based summer reading game for over 20 years. Children are required to have completed grade one before they can take part in the game. With each turn of the game, participants are required to read the equivalent of two junior level books. To complete the game participants must have read the equivalent of 16 junior books. Children receive a reward for completing the game.

⁵ This finding should be viewed with some caution, however, as there were some reliability issues with respect to the Word Recognition Test used to assess reading levels. At the same time, the test is one commonly used in various school systems.

the Chatterbooks⁶ program in the United Kingdom, respondents unanimously reported that children read more widely as a result of the Chatterbooks groups; that is they read more books and a wider range of books. Similarly, summer reading participants in various Canadian summer reading programs reported that they read more books as a result of the program than they would have had they not attended the club (Fasick et. al., 2005). With respect to the UK's Summer Reading Challenge⁷ 66 percent of survey respondents (children who participated in the program) said they read more books than if they had not participated in the summer library program (Product Perceptions Ltd., 2003). Moreover, two-thirds of the children reported that they were introduced to books by authors new to them and almost half of the respondents reported reading a book they would not have wanted to read before.

As increased reading and improved reading ability are correlated, arguments can be made that increasing the amount of reading over the summer months contributes to enhanced reading proficiency. In a seminal study (Heyns, 1978) on the effects of summer reading, the academic progress of 3,000 grade six and seven students was tracked over a two-year period. The study found that the number of books read during the summer was consistently related to educational success. In addition, those children reading more than six books over the summer experienced even greater reading improvements. A more recent study, examining the effects of summer reading, found that reading at least 4 to 5 books over the summer helped to maintain reading proficiency (Kim, 2004).

Impact on Reading Enjoyment/Enthusiasm for Reading

As was noted earlier, reading enjoyment is associated with educational success. The National Literacy Trust in the United Kingdom reports that while their country has experienced an increase in basic literacy rates, reported reading for enjoyment is declining.

Summer reading research generally supports the hypothesis that involvement in summer reading programs increases reading enjoyment. Overall, the majority of survey participants from all three groups: students, parents, and teachers, agreed that students in the Summer Reading Program in Los Angeles County had a significantly higher interest in reading in comparison to the non-participants. The majority of participants (94%) reported that they will continue to read for fun after school starts in September.” (Evaluation and Training Institute, 2001). Evaluations of the Chatterbooks and Summer Reading Challenge (Reading Agency; Product Perceptions Ltd.) also reported that these programs increased children's reading enjoyment.

Impact on Confidence

In addition to improved confidence in reading, some studies have also examined the relationship between participation in reading clubs and social confidence. Increases in children's confidence

⁶ Chatterbooks started in 2001 as a partnership between Orange and the public library network. It has grown from a 2001 pilot in three library authorities to a programme involving reading groups in 96 library authorities.

⁷ The Summer Reading Challenge is run by The Reading Agency (United Kingdom) in partnership with library supplier Books for Libraries. The program is has extensive reach and is run throughout the United Kingdom's library authorities with 88 percent of library authorities taking part, involving 3,800 community libraries, and 600,000 children. Half of the children who take part complete the challenge of reading at least six books during the summer holidays.

and self esteem (The Reading Agency) and increased confidence to express views and opinions in a group (Product Perceptions Ltd.) were reported in two UK evaluations. In a Canadian study (Moffat) parents and teachers reported that there were significant educational and recreational benefits and that the summer reading club enhanced children's self-esteem and facilitated positive social interaction.

Impact on Library Use/ Libraries

Some studies have found that involvement in reading clubs increase children's competence in the use of the library. Forty-one percent of libraries participating in *Chatterbooks* (UK) said that children were more at ease in libraries and used them more confidently. With respect to the evaluation of the *Summer Reading Challenge* (UK), most children (71 percent) reported that books were easier to find in the library as a result of the summer program. Reading clubs may also serve to increase library use and membership. Twelve percent of Summer Reading Challenge participants reported that they specifically joined the library to take part in the summer program. The great majority of these children also reported that they would continue using the library after the summer program. In a Canadian study, focus group participants noted that an advantage to attending reading clubs was that libraries acquire a lot of new and highly anticipated books over the summer (Fasick et al. 2005).

In a survey of libraries across Pennsylvania, libraries reported that summer reading clubs encourage children to check more books out of the library. Nearly 75 percent of survey respondents stated that their circulation increased over 6 percent, while half of the libraries reported that the circulation exceeded 10 percent during the summer months (Celano & Neuman, 2001).

The *Chatterbooks* evaluation also pointed to some specific library impacts:

- Development of staff skills particularly with respect to reader development work with children (69 percent identified this as a positive outcome);
- Given the national nature of the program – more opportunities to share best practices nationally (63 percent identified this as a positive outcome); and
- Increased library use (63 percent identified this as a positive outcome), and the development of library stock and activities that meet the needs of children and youth.

Impacts on Parents/Families

Few studies examined the specific impact of library summer reading programs on families. However, some studies have found that reading programs can result in more parents reading to their children (Evaluation and Training Institute, 2001) and may serve to introduce other family members to the library (The Reading Agency).

Satisfaction with Summer Reading Programs

Overall, studies have reported very high satisfaction levels among parents and children with respect to library summer reading programs (Product Perceptions Ltd., Evaluation and Training Institute; Moffat). For example, an evaluation of the summer reading program at Hamilton

Public library found that children (93.5 %) and adolescents (100%) were satisfied to very satisfied with their reading club (Moffat).

Reported Best Practices

The following best practices with respect to summer library reading clubs were gleaned from the literature review:

- Locke's study showed that public libraries successful in reaching more than eight percent of their child population in the summer reading program have: less restrictions in program design; articulated goals and objectives; a marketing strategy; evaluation methods; and trained children's specialists;
- Effective partnerships with schools are a key ingredient to successfully promote summer reading programs (Evaluation and Training Institute, 2001).
- As libraries depend on parents to encourage children to use their services, libraries need to emphasize the educational benefits of summer reading programs (Walter & Markey cited in Celano & Newman, 2001).
- Focus groups conducted by Fasick (2005) revealed that roughly half of the children had participated in summer reading programs at libraries. They revealed that the incentives (prizes) were points of satisfaction with the program.
- Other strengths of summer reading clubs as voiced by focus group attendees (Fasick et.al., 2005) were that children were able to choose their own books to read.
- A survey of librarians in the UK found that the following summer reading activities worked particularly well – activities involving crafts (designing book covers, making and using the fortune teller; reading and writing poetry; Author events; using computers; games; linking activities with national initiatives (The Reading Agency).
- Key factors identified for successful reader development in public libraries were knowledgeable staff, an understanding of the target audience and a suitable environment (The Reading Agency, 2004);
- Suggestions for effective methods for reaching disadvantaged youth include forming partnerships with schools and community groups; and involving parents and volunteers (Johnson, 2000).

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