

THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

LIBRARIES AND THE SUMMER READING GAP:
KEEPING THE RESOURCES FLOWING FOR LOW INCOME STUDENTS

BY

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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

DEPARTMENT OF ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

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Submitted by TERRI L. CHALATURNYK

In Partial Fulfillment of The Requirements for the Degree of Master of Education

Dr. Roberta McKay
Capping Course Instructor

Date: July 28, 2006

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We Did It!

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Introduction

Inevitably, September staff room conversations in my schools seem to include a discussion about the academic ground students have lost over the summer. Teachers see the long summer break as detrimental to student learning. Research does not support the perception of losses across all subjects for all children. Cooper, Ney, Charlton, Lindsay, and Greathouse (1996), in their review of 39 studies and meta-analysis of 13, found declines for all students in spelling and in math achievement scores. They also found declines in reading achievement for students from low socio-economic status (SES) families, along with slight gains in reading for more affluent students. The fact that the reading achievement gap is between poor and more affluent students makes summer reading loss a social justice issue for me, as well as an educational one.

My interest in the social justice issues created by poverty probably has its origins in the daily hygiene inspection that occurred every morning when I was in grade two. I got perfect marks. I had clean hands, clean clothing in good repair, and a clean hanky. Some students did not. I vividly remember my overwhelming sense of shame and powerlessness over the daily humiliation faced by students who started their morning with farm chores, lived in homes without running water and, I thought, might not have enough money for a hanky.

My grade two experience helped shape my worldview and for the past 28 years has shaped my teaching practice. My powerlessness as a grade two student now provides the impetus for me, as a classroom teacher and a teacher-librarian, to question my practice in the light of its effect on each individual. I continue to be particularly aware of the unique needs of students from low SES homes.

I see public education as our chance as a society to provide equal opportunity for all children to realize their potential. I do not believe the world can afford to squander the brilliant minds of those who become disenfranchised. Not only do we lose all they could have brought to the world, we pay the price of their antisocial behavior when genius, passion, and conscientious effort are focused on destructive goals.

My passion for school libraries is grounded in the belief that libraries should play a central role in literacy and in the pursuit of equity by providing all students with physical access to resources through library collections and intellectual access through library programs. These themes have guided my course work, my learning, and my practice over the course of my Master's program.

This paper chronicles my efforts to address the summer reading gap by opening a school library during the summer. The paper starts with the convergence of my interest in equitable education for all students, the impact of Allington's writing on my district and my practice, and an offer from a proactive principal of a library to open for the summer. The research that informed the project and continues my learning is in section two. The summer library program is covered in section three and my conclusions, reflections, and questions form the final section of the paper.

The Challenge

In 2003, Allington's work was being read widely in my school district. *What Really Matters for Struggling Readers: Designing Research-Based Programs* (Allington, 2001) had formed the focus of the teacher-librarians' reading group I hosted the previous year. The book, which has since been updated (Allington, 2006), met our needs as teacher-librarians to be aware of the literature influencing change for the classroom

teachers we work with, to ensure our teaching practices were evolving in ways that paralleled and supported the changing practice of the teachers we work with, and to provide continuity for the students we teach. We also needed to understand Allington's call for classroom libraries, which was shifting spending priorities in our district. We hoped to use our specialized knowledge and previous experience to help our schools build classroom libraries in ways that support school libraries, that are effective over time, are fiscally responsible and, when looked at school or district wide, are pedagogically sound.

Like much of Allington's writing, *What Really Matters for Struggling Readers: Designing Research-Based Programs* (2001) challenges educators to bring about change. Teacher-librarians in my district believe they, along with classroom teachers and administration, need to accept the challenge to ensure students have appropriate and abundant resources, and the time and skill to read them. Allington's directive to worry "less about losing books to children and more about losing children to illiteracy," (p. 69) eloquently expresses our focus.

The Gap

When "Bridging the Summer Reading Gap" (McGill-Franzen & Allington, 2003) and "The Impact of Summer Setback on the Reading Achievement Gap" (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2003) were published, our district responded with discussion, reflection, and action. One elementary school principal set up an honour library (McGill-Franzen & Allington, p.18). Several schools libraries gave away discarded library books to students.

As the district teacher-librarian, I organized the distribution of discarded materials made available from library weeding, school closures, and donations. School and library

labels are covered with “Community Literacy Project” labels and a label stating, “Reading changes lives. Please keep this book as long as you are enjoying it and then pass it on!” The labels have successfully addressed a number of issues created when library books are removed from collections. Covering the library labels ensures the books can be identified at a glance when they find their way back to schools, thereby minimizing the labour required to deal with them on an ongoing basis. The labels effectively explain our educational intent to the public. In the three years we have been running the program, we have not had a complaint regarding our distribution of these books. This program also provides schools with a method of dealing with materials that are no longer being used but which may still serve some purpose. We select books for distribution carefully to ensure that books with misinformation, extensive damage, or missing pages are not included. We offer books to a variety of community based literacy projects. We have provided books to an outreach program for First Nations families, to school district summer reading programs, and to the city’s Parks and Recreation summer programs. Summer programs are encouraged to pass books on to children at the end of each summer.

I contacted the local Food Bank to see if they would be interested in distributing books. They were tentative but willing to try the idea for a 2 week period on the condition that I remove any unclaimed materials at the end of the 2 weeks. I used a small bookcase near the entry of the Food Bank to display books under a large “free books” sign. Food Bank users enthusiastically embraced the idea and both adult and children’s materials flew off the shelves. We supplied a bigger bookshelf to help us meet the demand. In my weekly trips to the Food Bank to restock shelves, I was often thanked by Food Bank

users, who enjoyed talking about what they were currently reading and the titles they had chosen. I was particularly heartened by the stories parents told me about reading to their children and by their joy in being able to supply books to their children, many of whom had not owned books of their own prior to this program.

We continue to deliver books and magazines to the Food Bank and remove unclaimed titles. This program is placing thousands of books and magazines into low income homes in our community.

Irresistible Offer

“What else can we do?” was my ongoing question so when one of our elementary school principals walked by my desk and laughingly suggested the two of us open his school library for the summer, I jumped at the chance.

I had previously worked at the school, referred to in this paper for confidentiality reasons as Eagle Elementary School, for four years. It is a high needs K-6 school with an enrollment of approximately 180 students. The school population includes a significant percentage of First Nations students and the celebration of First Nations culture is evident in the school. A large percentage of the students are considered at risk. The risk is significant enough to ensure additional support from the school district for resources, district staff time and attention, and targeted programs for at risk students. The province also provides additional funding for a variety of programs including breakfast and lunch programs, and a Parents and Tots program. The school is one of 13 K to 6 elementary schools located in a small resource based city on Vancouver Island.

As part of their assessment of our community, The Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) divided the city into neighbourhoods, which did not correspond to

school catchment areas. In each neighbourhood they identified the percentage of people in households living below the “low income cutoff level” set by Statistics Canada. (see Income Statistics Division, Statistics Canada, 2004, for a detailed explanation of low income cutoff levels). When compared to the rest of the city, Eagle Elementary students reside in the three neighbourhoods with the highest percentages of people below the low income cutoff on the HELP maps (Human Early Learning Partnership, 2006a, p. 20).

These three low income neighbourhoods were also found, in the HELP study of school readiness in 5 year olds, to have the highest percentages in our community of children who are *ever* vulnerable on any of the five scales the study measures (Human Early Learning Partnership, 2006b, p. 16). This high poverty area, with large numbers of vulnerable children, is at risk for summer reading loss. Eagle Elementary was an excellent location to test the potential of using the school library to address the summer reading gap.

The school principal started discussions with the union responsible for the summer cleaning and conducted a parent survey. A significant number of parents were interested in having their children use the school library during the summer. The union was supportive. All we had to do was make it happen.

The Research

The summer reading gap literature points to a problem outside of the school year as the cause of the reading achievement gap between low SES children and their more affluent peers. Both Cooper et al. (1996) in their review of 39 studies and Entwisle, Alexander, and Olsen (2001) in their longitudinal Baltimore Beginning School Study, found that while poor students enter school at a disadvantage, they learn at the same rate

as their more affluent classmates. The family resources, financial or psychological, do not predict the rate of academic growth during the school year. This finding was consistent across grade levels. The equal rate of growth means that although poor children progress well during the school year, they do not close the achievement gap that exists between them and their classmates. The gap that existed in September is still present at the end of the school year. Even though the rate of growth slows down for all students during the summer, affluent students continue to progress during the summer break, while low SES children remain at the same level or regress. Both Cooper et al. and Entwisle et al. found the summer losses to be cumulative: each summer low SES students fall further behind (see Figure 1).

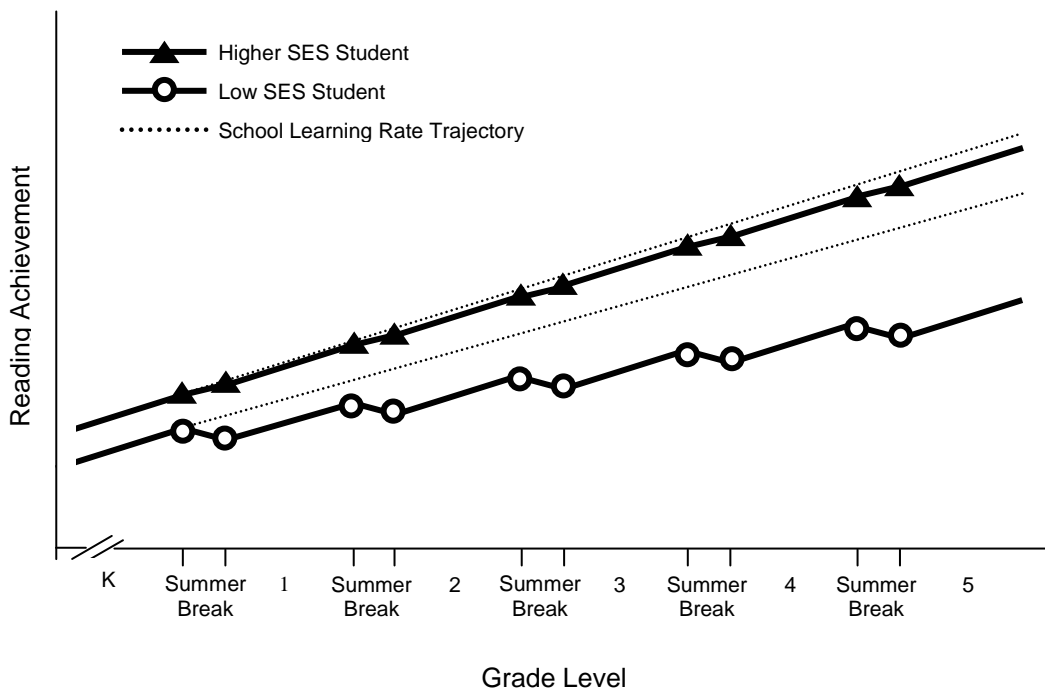


Figure 1. Hypothetical reading achievement scores of high and low income students, showing the impact of the summer break on rate of learning.

Cooper et al. (1996), in addition to discussing the general impact of the summer break on reading achievement as a whole, also quantify the gap and break out specific reading tasks:

Middle-class children showed significantly greater absolute summer gains in reading and language achievement than lower-income students. Middle-class students showed a nonsignificant gain in grade-level equivalent reading scores, while lower-class students showed a significant loss. On average, summer vacations created a gap of about 3 months between middle and lower-class students. For specific reading areas, comprehension scores for both income groups declined over summer, but declined more for lower-class students. Reading recognition scores showed a significant gain for middle-class students and a significant loss for lower-class students. (p. 261-262)

By the end of their elementary years, the achievement gap between poor and more affluent children is almost completely attributable to the impact of the summer break (Cooper et al., 1996). The summer reading gap is the problem we must address to eliminate inequities in reading achievement between affluent and less affluent children. What happens during the summers to create the gap?

Gap Hypothesis

Entwisle et al. (2001) explain the seasonal pattern of student achievement with a faucet metaphor. During the school year the resource faucet is turned on for all children and they gain equally. During the summer, school resources are turned off. Middle and upper income families can compensate to some degree for the reduced flow, so their

children continue to progress at a slower pace. Poor families cannot make up for the reduced flow of resources, so their children remain at the same level or lose ground.

Access to print materials seems an obvious resource provided by higher SES families that lower SES families might be less able to provide. The strong positive correlation between reading achievement and access to an adequate volume of reading materials (Topping, 1999; Mullis, Martin, Gonzalez, & Kennedy, 2003) supports this theory.

Smith and Constantio (1997) found that access to print materials varied with income. In their study of three neighbourhoods, which varied by SES, they found a huge difference in the number of age-appropriate books in homes, with students in the lowest SES area having 0.4 books per student compared to 199.2 per student in the most affluent neighbourhood. The community services also showed significant disparities. The affluent neighbourhood had a public library collection that was twice the size of libraries in the other two neighbourhoods. The more affluent neighbourhoods had five bookstores within walking distance of their homes while students from the low income neighbourhood had no bookstores within walking distance. Subsequent research supports their findings: poor students have less access to reading materials.

Neuman and Celano (2004) found the same dramatic inequities in their studies of school and public libraries in low income and higher income neighbourhoods. School libraries in middle income areas had 12 books per student in good to excellent condition, compared to 2 books per student in good to poor condition in school libraries located in low income areas. Low income area schools also had, fewer computers, libraries that were open 3 days per week compared to 5 in the middle income area school libraries, and

untrained librarians compared to librarians with Master's degrees and 12 years experience (p. 85).

The qualifications of the staff and the number of days the library is open at Eagle Elementary do not differ from school libraries in higher income areas of the community. Eagle Elementary also meets the acceptable collection size standards outlined in *Achieving Information Literacy: Standards for School Library Programs in Canada* (Asselin, M., Branch, J., & Oberg, D., 2003, p. 28). While there are at least 30 books per student in the library, which range in condition from poor to excellent, libraries in higher income areas of the community certainly show the effects of parental fund raising in the superior condition and the age of the collections.

The Summer Program

Allington and McGill-Franzen (2003) challenge educators to turn the faucet back on: to get resources into the hands of students who would normally be without them during the summer. They suggest getting students to read a minimum of six books, matched to the child's reading level, over the summer (McGill-Franzen & Allington, 2003, p. 58). This suggestion defined our goal. Could we help Eagle Elementary students read a minimum of six books over the summer?

Setup

The school principal was instrumental in dealing with the challenges of opening the school library during the summer. Obtaining permission to use the building, organizing summer cleaning schedules, custodial support, and resolving union issues were his department. I worked on a study design, the ethics proposals, school district approval for the project, community library support, creating student reading passports,

and the information sheets and permission slips (see Appendix) to allow me to use the data I would gather. Together we worked on the format of the summer program, informing stakeholders, and gathering prizes and food to add a bit of a festive air to our program. We also collected a selection of novels and magazines for teens and adults who might accompany children to the library. The principal and I met with the school staff, the parent group, and representatives from the First Nations community to discuss the program, seek input and support, address concerns, and outline the study I would be doing. I also spoke to the student body at a spring assembly, inviting them to use the library that summer and explaining the study.

Adjustments to the plan were made to address issues raised by the stakeholders. The reading scores from testing routinely done in the school each spring and fall would be used as data for the study to avoid subjecting students to an additional test administered by someone they did not know. At the request of the First Nations community representatives, First Nations status would not be used as a variable. Two hundred fifty books would be added to the collection at the start of the summer to address the issues of losses and the additional wear and tear on the collection. Losses and damage to specific items would be addressed at the end of the summer. The custodial staff was supportive and willing to organize the seasonal cleaning around the library program.

I provided promotional posters with dates and times, which were hung in the school, provided to teachers, and sent home in a smaller format to advertise the opening of the school library during July and August. A week later an information package was sent home to parents and students, which included a cover letter from the principal, consent forms, and an explanation of the study (see Appendix). A final flyer, inviting

students and parents to use the library over the summer, went home with report cards at the end of June. By keeping the promotion of the summer library program separate from the request for study participants, I had hoped to minimize confusion and assist parents and students in understanding that participation in the two events was independent. Students could be included in the study without attending the library summer program, and conversely, students could come to the library during the summer without being part of the study. It was very apparent, during conversations and some written communications, that I had only limited success in keeping the two events separate in parents' minds. Variations on the comment, "my child would like to be part of the study, but we won't be here this summer" were common and were addressed on an individual basis as they arose.

The Doors Open

Eagle Elementary students had a 69 day summer break that year, from June 30, 2004 to September 6, 2004 inclusive. For the first two weeks of the break while the principal and I were still busy with our jobs, the custodial staff had time to organize the summer cleaning jobs to accommodate our program. July 13 was the first day we opened the library for summer readers. Nine students joined us that day. From that point on, the library was open every Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday from 10 am to 1 pm until August 19. The program ended two weeks prior to regular classes resuming because teachers were in the building getting ready for school startup, I was busy with school startup responsibilities, and the custodial staff needed time to complete the summer cleaning tasks.

We strove for a relaxed, welcoming atmosphere in the library with a focus on helping students celebrate reading and books. The school principal joined us daily for a short period at the beginning of the summer to launch the program and bridge the transition period while parents and students got to know me. We welcomed every person who came through the door, whether they attended Eagle Elementary or not. While the program was not advertised outside the school, students had been told that any guests they brought would be welcome and allowed to sign out books. We had a number of out of town guests, and students from other schools, drop in to the library.

The principal and I are both enthusiastic readers of children's literature, so helping students find just the right books was a pleasure. Lots of "book talk" was encouraged. The principal and I moved around the library assisting parents and students with book selection. Students were encouraged to borrow in quantities that provided them with enough reading material to last until their next library visit. Eagle Elementary students use the expression "just right books" to describe books that are not too easy and not too difficult: books they can read fluently and understand. The principal and I assisted them in choosing titles that were just right and would count toward reading prizes, but no one was discouraged from borrowing any book that interested them, regardless of reading level. After all, as any teacher-librarian will tell you, free choice is a strong motivator and no reading should ever be discouraged.

I donated a number of books that I felt passionate about to the library. Having these titles in the library collection gave me the opportunity to share my excitement and to introduce students to some titles that were new to them.

I have consistently found that children of all ages are very aware of their reading ability and self-conscious about their inabilities, so I was not surprised when poor readers at Eagle Elementary were reluctant to reveal their reading problems to me. The protective and evasive strategies they employ are consistent with the behaviors I see every time I start work in a library that is new to me. Trust is a prerequisite to conversations that bump up against areas people perceive as deficiencies and Eagle Elementary students are no exception. I needed to earn their trust and they needed time to learn to trust me.

All students were given reading passports, which gave them a place to record the author, the title, and their responses to each book they read. While students were welcome to use the passports in any way they chose, prizes were given for every six books the student read that were at their reading level. While I am aware of the issues around using extrinsic rewards, they are commonly used in the school during reading promotion activities and are part of the school culture. In the summer program they provided an authentic reason for me to interview students, approve books as being just right, and track the number of just right books, while not discouraging reading above and below that level. Reading levels were checked through one-on-one conferencing. Students discussed the content of the book to demonstrate comprehension and sometimes read short passages aloud to share part of the story or, when comprehension was an issue, to measure fluency and problem solve reading level issues. My signature in their reading passports indicated titles that the student and I had agreed would contribute to the six they needed to read to receive a prize. Even the most enthusiastic readers avoided adding much to their passports beyond the required title entry. While most students enjoyed

talking about the books they read, they almost unanimously avoided writing or drawing about them.

Older students soon raised the issue of volume of reading. Their novels might take them a week to read, while younger siblings were reading a book or two each day. The students and I decided that each reader would negotiate a prize structure for each novel they were reading. Students would discuss the length of time they thought the novel would take them to read and together we would decide on a count for the book. They would require six “equivalent to one book” credits to obtain a prize. Students were very reasonable in their requests. Equivalent to one book credits were equated to a range of reading times, from one half hour to several hours of reading. Even though a number of students were reading very large, text dense, young adult novels, the maximum credit requested for any single novel was four.

Prizes were small and were provided by teachers, local businesses, bookstores, and BC publishers. Prizes included pencils, pencil toppers, posters, novels, picture books, and coupons for fast food, bowling, and movies. The movie coupons were in big demand but, beyond that, only a few students were highly motivated by the prizes. Some students chose not to take prizes, though they enjoyed tracking their reading and I continued to record the prizes they earned.

The Data

Attendance

Attendance was erratic and very similar, I imagine, to public library use. Some students dropped in once, looked around, and left without a book. Some came weekly. Some came when they needed a book. Some students came daily, met their friends at the

library, and stayed for hours. Some came with parents, caretakers, siblings, or friends. Some came by themselves. They walked, rode their bikes, or were dropped off and picked up. They took out books for themselves or someone they knew who needed just that book. They took books one at a time, by the armload, or in numbers determined by their need at the time. Some packed a lunch and some came hungry. They were anything but predictable. And they read – books big and small, books fat and thin, magazines, graphic novels, fiction, non-fiction, and big books.

Total attendance varied from 1 to 13 students per day. The mean number of visits was 6.1 students per day, with a mode and median of 5. The highest attendance occurred on the two days following reminder phone calls. The first call, on July 19, was to all families in the school. The second call, made on August 2, was only to families who indicated they would like another call. Attendance on the day following each phone call was more than double the mean attendance and exceeded the highest days without a reminder phone call by almost 50% (see Figure 2).

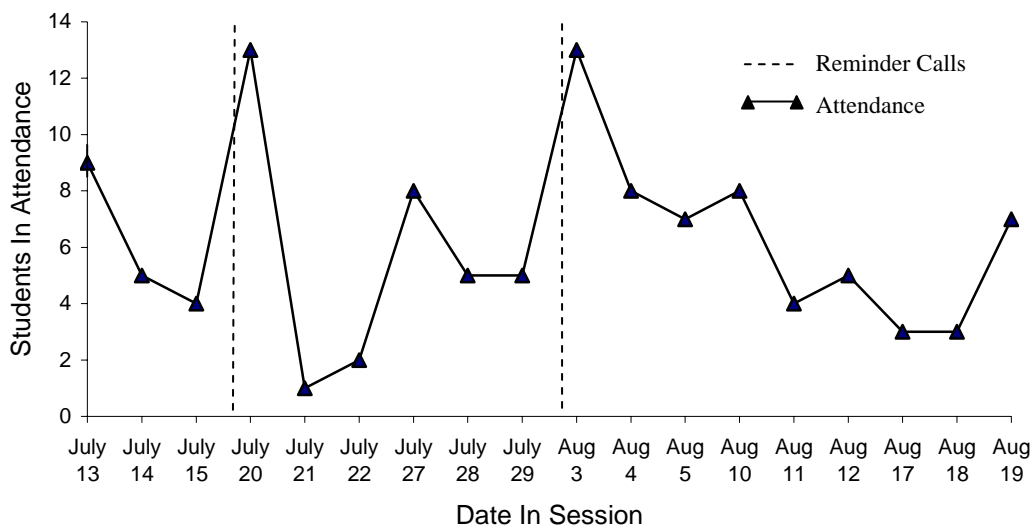


Figure 2. Student attendance with timing of phone calls made to remind families of the summer library program.

Thirty-seven students visited the library a total of 110 times over the 18 days the library was open during July and August. Approximately one third of the Eagle Elementary students who came to the library came only once and did not receive any prizes (see Figure 2). I collected consent forms, signed by students and their parents, allowing 19 of the students who attended the summer library program to be part of this study. These 19 form a volunteer sample, not a random one. The characteristics of volunteer samples have been well documented by researchers: “Volunteers differ from non-volunteers in important ways. Volunteers tend to be better educated, higher socio-economically, more intelligent, more in need of social approval, more sociable, more unconventional, less authoritarian, and less conforming than non-volunteers” (McMillan, 2000, p. 111). Although I chose a school with a high percentage of low SES students, the Eagle Elementary student body is not a homogeneous population: students from all income levels attend the school. The volunteer effect should therefore be expected to bias the sample by reducing the percentage of low SES students.

In much of the summer reading gap literature, American researchers are able to identify low SES students by their Title 1 status or their qualification for meal subsidies. The only way for me to get information about the SES of the students I was working with was to ask their parents. This seemed to me, and to my faculty advisor, to be far too personal a question. In discussions with parents about the role of SES in the research on summer reading gap, their discomfort made it obvious that the topic was as socially inappropriate as I had expected it to be. Since I have not controlled for SES in any way beyond conducting my study in a school with a high proportion of low SES students, the

results of this study cannot be generalized beyond the 19 students who took part. Any generalization to the target population of low SES students is compromised.

Reading Volume and Attendance

There is a positive correlation between attendance and the number of prizes students in the study collected. One prize represents six just right books or reading sessions, and was based on McGill-Franzen and Allington's (2003, p. 58) suggestion that reading 6 reading level appropriate books over the summer would prevent summer reading loss. Four students attended once and did not earn any prizes. The other 15 students were active participants: they attended more than once, and with the exception of two students, received at least one prize. Even students who only visited the library twice over the summer were likely to have read the minimum 6 books (see Figure 3).

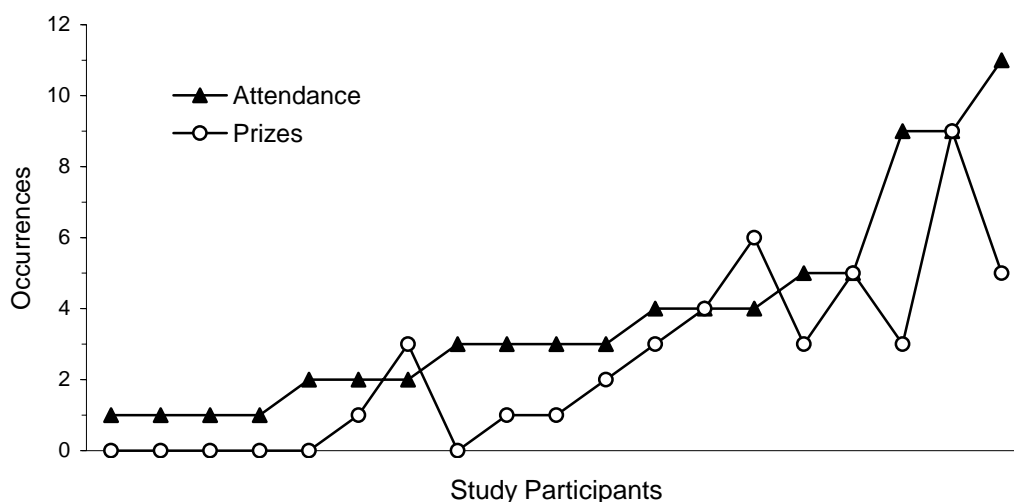


Figure 3. Participant attendance in relation to the number of prizes earned.

How does this translate into books read? In the following discussion I use “book” as a unit of measurement that actually describes portions of novels taking 30 minutes to several hours to read, as well as single books. Since each prize represents six “books”, multiplying prizes by six provides the minimum number of books read per student. The

maximum number of books read per student was calculated by multiplying prizes by six and adding five, the largest number of books it was possible to read without earning a prize. The 19 students who attended the summer library program read between 276 and 351 books in total. That is an average of 14.5 to 19.5 books per student and significantly exceeds our target of six books per student. Sixty-eight percent of the study participants met or exceeded the target but six students (32%) failed to read the minimum six books. The student who read the greatest number of books read 54 to 59 books (see Figure 4).

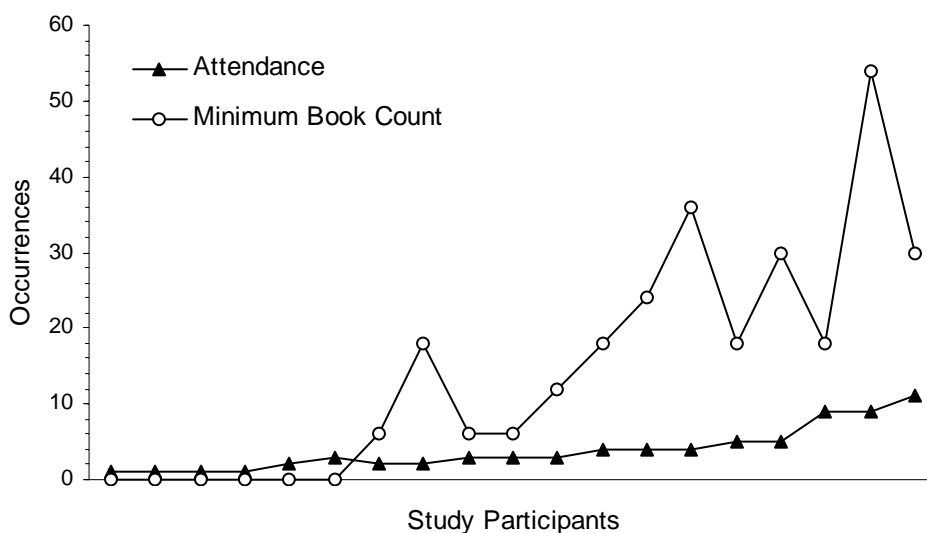


Figure 4. Participant attendance in comparison with minimum number of books read.

Measuring Reading Success

If the school library is going to address summer reading loss, all this reading must translate into higher reading achievement scores. Eagle Elementary uses PM Benchmark Kit 2: An Assessment Resource (Randell & Smith, 2003) and The Toolkit: Placing Intermediate Students in Instructional Reading Groups (Thompson & Molinski, n.d.) to assess student reading and identify at risk students. Tests are administered by classroom teachers and are designed to provide teachers with detailed information on fluency and

reading comprehension to allow the teacher to place students along a continuum of reading materials, identify student needs, and inform their teaching. The tests are not designed to provide reading achievement scores. Upward mobility in both tests is limited by the comprehension component. Once comprehension breaks down, testing stops and the reading level is assigned, regardless of the other skills displayed.

In PM Benchmark (Randell & Smith, 2003) reading levels range from level 1 to level 30. The beginning levels of the test measure very small increments of improvement and later levels measure larger jumps. While teachers in our district know that most grade one students will move from level 1 to somewhere around level 16 during the year, the instrument itself does not supply grade level equivalencies. Both administration and scoring of the test require teachers to use their judgement. After extensive, widespread use in our district over a number of years, the teachers I talk to are confident that PM Benchmark is a reliable instrument. They also see the information they gain on students' reading skills as valid.

The Tool Kit (Thompson & Molinski, n.d.) is designed, and is being used at Eagle Elementary, to place "intermediate students in instructional groups for Guided Reading" (p. 2). Put together by North Vancouver School District staff, it provides three reading passages per grade, labelled with the grade level and an *a*, *b*, or *c* to indicate the increasing difficulty of the passages. The passages students are required to read are taken from a variety of readers and assessment tools. There is no discussion of reliability, validity, or field testing in the instrument. This instrument has also been used widely for a number of years in our district and in my conversations with our teachers it is evident that

they do not feel The Tool Kit grade level ratings are valid reflections of student reading levels.

Classroom teachers determined the timing of the testing at Eagle Elementary. Testing occurred over two 6 week periods from May to June and September to October. In the hypothetical situation illustrated in Figure 5 the testing process does not measure the learning occurring after the spring test and before the fall test. Because the learning that occurred between the test events more than compensates for the loss that occurred in the summer, this student appears to have progressed but has actually lost ground (Cooper et al., 1996, p. 230). It is possible that the two 6 week blocks of instructional time that occurred at Eagle Elementary between tests may be masking summer reading losses.

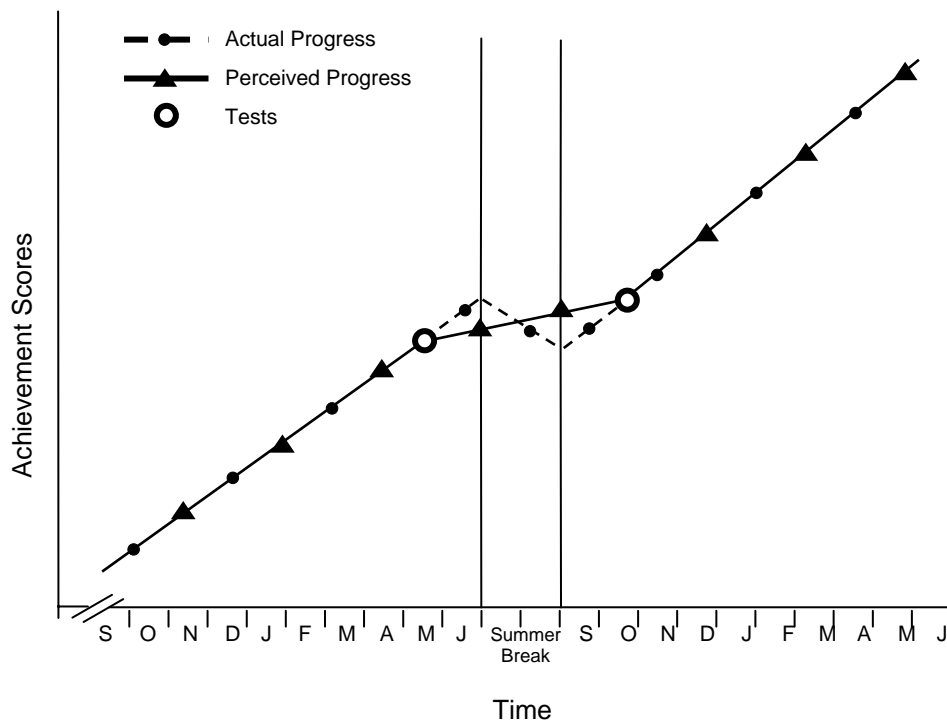


Figure 5. Effect of learning that occurs between spring and fall testing on perceptions of a hypothetical student's achievement.

I used the spring and fall reading results to assign study participants to one of four possible groups: reading level increased, reading level decreased, reading level maintained, and problematic data. Students with incomplete data were rated problematic and since there is no way to equate PM Benchmarks (Randell & Smith, 2003) results to The Tool Box (Thompson & Molinski, n.d.) results, students whose spring and fall assessments were not made with the same instrument were rated problematic. Since Kim (2004) found reading 4 to 5 books might be enough to prevent summer reading loss, the six students who attended the summer library program but did not read the required six book minimum were also rated problematic. The problematic group was removed from the analysis, leaving a sample of 14 students: 8 who had attended the summer library program and 6 who had not.

Seven of the 8 students (87.5%) who participated in the summer library program and reached or exceeded the six book minimum, maintained or increased their reading level over the summer break, compared to 3 of the 6 students (50%) who did not attend. One of the 8 students (12.5%) who participated in the summer library program and reached or exceeded the 6 book minimum, lost ground over the summer break, compared to 3 of the 6 students (50%) who did not attend the summer library program (see Figure 6).

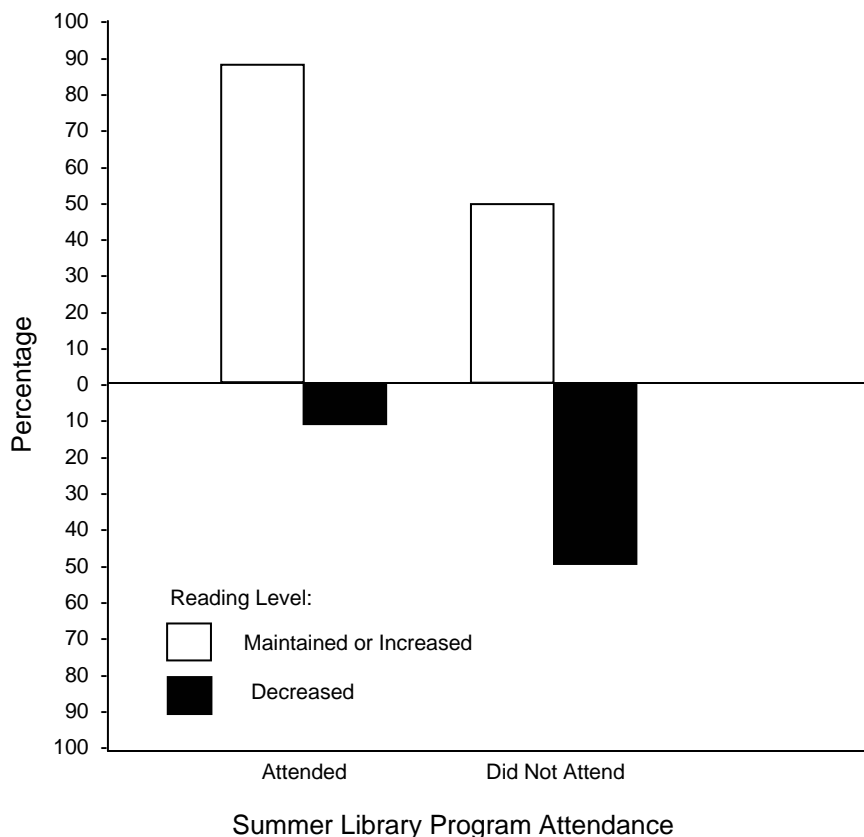


Figure 6. Changes in reading levels sorted by participation or non-participation in the summer library program.

Based on their reading scores, nine students who participated in the study had been identified by their teachers as “at risk” readers. Three of these students attended the summer library program and 6 did not. Three students is too small a sample to draw conclusions from but it is interesting to note that all three at risk readers who attended the summer program were able to maintain or improve their reading level over the summer, compared to only half of the students who did not attend (see Figure 7).

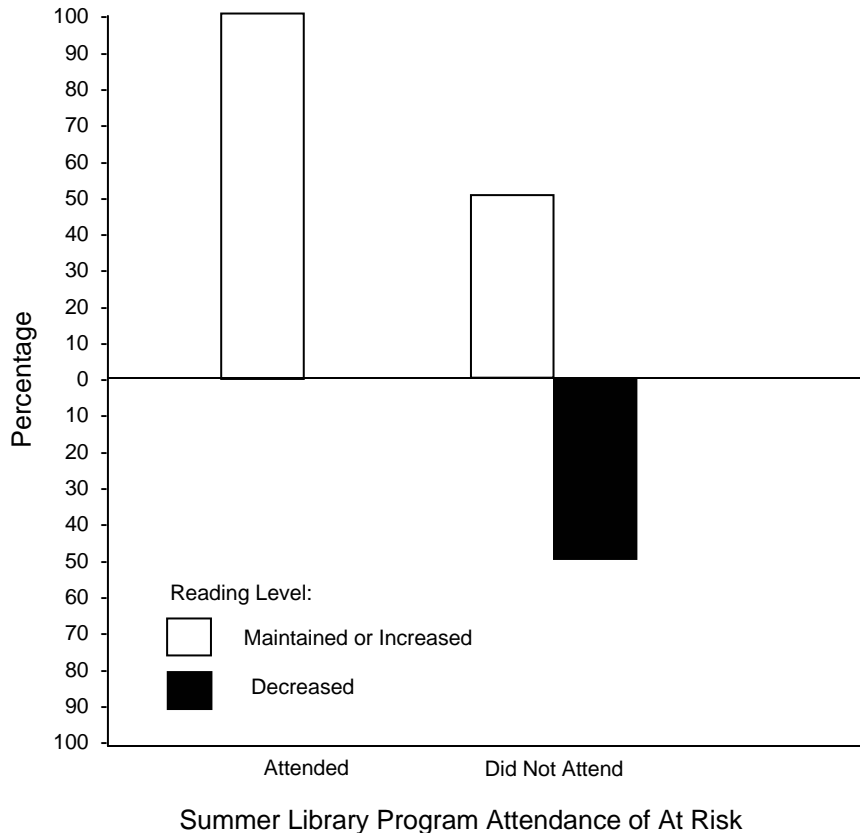


Figure 7. Changes in reading levels of at risk students sorted by participation or non-participation in the summer library program.

What Did I Learn?

If You Open the Library, They Will Come

The students who came to Eagle Elementary during the summer came because they wanted to “First it was my idea to come here and then I told my mom and then it was my mom’s idea” or came because their parents wanted them to, “I didn’t want to come here.... My family made me come.” Students from both groups kept coming because they enjoyed themselves. “I thought you would have to read way hard books. Not easy ones.It’s fun. I don’t know [how to make it more fun], I haven’t a clue.”

Providing food as part of the summer library program was a powerful motivator for a number of children. It became apparent the first day that a few snacks were not

enough for children who arrived hungry. The second day of the program I added apples and bagels with peanut butter to our menu, and while food may have gotten some of these students through the door, books kept them in the library reading, long after the food had been eaten.

Parents and students were comfortable in the school library. As one parent put it, the Eagle Elementary library was “a familiar environment, close to home with people and friends we know.” Very few of the parents or students I met over the summer used the public library. Coming to the school library seemed to fit into people’s lives more easily than going to the public library. One parent felt more “accountable” with the school library program and made sure her children got to the school weekly over the summer to exchange books.

Summer is a hectic time for families. Eagle Elementary students, like all of us, went on holidays, attended summer camps, babysat siblings, helped their parents around the house, had bonfires on the beaches, hung out, slept in, played hard, and enjoyed summer. Going to the school library during the summer was a new idea and had to compete for attention. Calling families to remind them the library was open was very effective. The response to reminder phone calls leads me to believe that an ongoing summer library program would build over the years as people become more aware of its existence. As the summer progressed students started to arrange to meet their friends at the school library and would come by to see who was there. The social aspect of the program started to build and proved to be a positive influence on the program, since they all read, regardless of what brought them through the door.

An ongoing program would begin to develop an infrastructure to support it. The First Nations representatives had discussed the possibility of arranging transportation to bring children from the reserves to the library once a week. An ongoing program would allow ideas like this one to develop. The problems in getting to the library would become apparent over time and could be addressed as needed.

The red flag for me in the attendance patterns was the number of students who came to the library once and left without a book. Some were visitors who came for a day with their friends who were Eagle Elementary students. Being inside the school during the summer really appealed to students and they enjoyed showing off their access to friends, who were suitably impressed. I felt I had been unable to connect with many of the others who came only once. Were they just curious or do they represent a missed opportunity? What if these students are the ones we are trying to reach with this program? What if they are reluctant readers with few reading materials at home? What would the library summer program be like for them, their first time through the door? If they came when the principal was there, they saw a familiar, trusted face and a male model of reading enthusiasm. The principal was very effective with a number of boys who were reluctant to find a book and read. He knew their interests and their reading levels so he was able to quickly help them locate books they would like. He read to them, got them hooked, and then left them to read on their own. If those reluctant boys first arrived on a day when the principal was not there, they were greeted by a stranger. I have 22 years experience and considerable skill in welcoming reluctant readers into the library. What I did not have at Eagle Elementary was time.

One student never came alone. He and his friends would sit together and while the other students read, he chatted, wandered, and hung out. The books he picked were similar to the titles the other boys at his table were reading. The problem was, he could not read them. He avoided conversations with me and eye contact, answering my questions with whispered single syllable words. There was no way he was going to let me in on his secret. My opportunity came the day the rest of the boys at his table got prizes. He grumbled loud and long and I suggested a solution. I had a bunch of books that he could read quickly to catch up. It was, the boys agreed, the perfect solution. This student became the most focused reader at his table. His conversations with me about what he was reading were suddenly animated. He raised his head, spoke with a strong voice, made eye contact, and smiled. Because he had stayed to be with his friends time had provided the opportunity for he and I to find a solution to his problem.

Students who have reading difficulties are often reluctant to talk about those difficulties. Choosing a book from the collection that you can read and understand is a public declaration of your reading level. Poor readers, therefore, often prefer to choose books at their grade level that they cannot read, instead of books at their reading level. For students who came only once, facing a stranger, no matter how gentle and welcoming, might have been enough to turn poor readers away.

This is a powerful argument for having the school teacher-librarian run the summer library program. Teacher-librarians can capitalize on the relationships they already have with students. Creating a successful summer library program that addresses the learning needs of the students goes far beyond opening the door and passing out books. If students are going to maintain reading skills or progress over the summer there

has to be someone in the program who can match books to students. This requires an extensive knowledge of the library collection and an understanding of reading assessment and instruction. Teacher-librarians are experts at both.

The student in the study who made the most dramatic gains started the summer as an average reader for his grade level and returned to school as an exceptional reader. His parents were surprised and thrilled by his progress, which continued through the school year. The following summer there was no summer school library program but this boy had lots to read at home. Since he loves reading and was reading every day, his parents had no concerns until his first assessment after returning to school in the fall. Instead of reading far above his grade level, he was now reading at grade level. His mother feels the difference lies in the reading level of the books he read over the summer. During the summer library program I worked with the student to ensure the books he was reading were at his reading level. At home that did not happen. Many of the books he had at home were below his reading level, so he lost ground.

If They Come, They Will Read

The summer library program was successful in encouraging students to read. The volume of reading was very high but the numbers only tell part of the story. Many students spent time reading at the library in addition to taking books home with them. There were a few who read only at the library or just dropped in to pick up books to take home. There was a lot of book talk in the library through the summer. Students had the time to talk about what they were reading in an unstructured environment. They joyfully shared the books they loved and just as joyfully slammed the ones they disliked. Conversations were often spirited as they swapped opinions. Much of my summer

reading was directed by student recommendations, which helped build relationships. Once they realized I too was looking for great books to read, the flow of suggestions was continual. It was a wonderful atmosphere fuelled by choice and collaboration in a risk free environment: the three conditions Baker (2003) states enhance motivation. As Krashen (2004) said, “When children read for pleasure, when they get ‘hooked on books’ they acquire, involuntarily and without conscious effort, nearly all of the so-called language skills so many people are so concerned about” (p. 149).

Finding the perfect book for students at the early primary level was difficult. Library collections for primary tend to rely on picture books. Eagle Elementary has a wonderful picture book collection but students looking for just right books were overwhelmed by the volume of books in this area of the library that were far above their reading level. While Eagle Elementary library’s collection includes wonderful literature at lower reading levels, like *Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?* by Bill Martin (1967), or *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle (1969), they do not have enough books at this level to meet the reading needs of the children who attended the summer reading program. Much of the material written at the early primary level, which was previously bound in hard cover anthologies, is now printed inexpensively in stapled paperback formats that will not stand up to library use. The cost of processing such flimsy books for the library is not justified for materials with such a short shelf life. The quality of writing in much of this material has also made libraries reluctant to include it in their collections. Schools have traditionally kept materials written at the early primary level in classrooms as instructional material. During the school year this division of resources works well. It did not, however, work well for the summer library program.

Classroom teachers lent bins of these materials to the library for the summer and I added the books from the library collection to the bins so students would have easy access to them. The fact that the district library staff had been working at adding reading levels to the library database made the process of locating the library materials much easier.

Parents and teachers were both concerned about losing books if we opened the library during the summer. Hertzman (2003) found BC children in families with incomes below \$20,000 moved most often, so Eagle Elementary may have a more transient population than a school in a higher income area. I would intuitively expect this to increase library losses. The summer library program had the opposite effect. Eight books were returned to the library by families who were spring cleaning or packing to move. Two books were not returned by a family that moved away and one classroom book was lost. There was a net gain of five books.

While we only lost one classroom book, the size of these fragile books made them easy to misplace and the wear and tear of an ongoing summer program would cause considerable attrition. Many of the classroom books I borrowed did not belong to the school. The classroom teacher had paid for them personally. This is not uncommon in my district or my province. The education system needs to assume responsibility for ensuring our classrooms have adequate reading materials, particularly in low income areas where resources may be limited in the neighbourhood and in the home. Ongoing funding is necessary to ensure materials are replaced as needed. Until that happens, getting appropriate materials into student's hands will be a problem.

If They Read They Will Maintain or Improve Their Reading Level

The small sample sizes in this study, the problems with timing and type of testing, and the lack of control of SES are a few of the issues that make it difficult to generalize the results to a larger population. For most of the students who took part in the summer reading program it was a success. The results support further exploration of summer library programs with larger sample sizes.

Wiseman and Baker (2004) see the summer learning gap as uniquely America and were unable to locate any research on summer learning beyond the research done in the United States. In my search for Canadian studies, I was able to locate only two. McCormick and Mason (1981), whose Canadian kindergarten subjects had a three month summer break, and Wintre (1986), who tested Canadian middle-class grade one, three, and five students who experienced a two month summer break, were included in the Cooper et al. (1996) meta-analysis. Like those in the American research, Wintre's middle class subjects showed gains in reading achievement. McCormick and Mason found a slight increase in reading achievement in their low-middle-income group. Like my data, theirs mirrors the findings of the American studies. While there are many similarities between Canada and the United States, findings of American studies cannot be generalized to Canadian populations. Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2000 data makes it obvious that both Canada and the United States have unique educational profiles (Organization For Economic Co-operation and Development, 2001). More research on the effect of the summer break on Canadian students is needed and would provide an excellent opportunity to explore the impact of the length of summer

breaks on academic achievement, since our summer break is traditionally two months compared to the standard three month American summer break.

Pride Goeth Before The Fall (Proverbs 16:18)

It is a privilege to teach children. I have learned a lot from colleagues, researchers, professors, conferences, and university courses over the past 28 years but the most powerful lessons, the ones that have lit up my brain, warmed my heart, and shaken me have always come from children. This study was no different. Towards the end of the summer, a boy who worked diligently on earning prizes finally chose a book as a prize. Two days later, he chose another one. They were beautiful hardcover picture books with wonderful stories I knew he would love. Here, I thought, was the reward for a summer's work. He had obviously had a shift in attitude. Books were finally more important to him than the trinkets and fast food coupon prizes he had chosen earlier in the summer. I waited a few days before asking him about the stories. How did he like the books? "I don't know," he replied. "I didn't read them. I'm selling them at our garage sale on Saturday. They're worth big bucks."

He was right, and I was reminded of the cultural gap between middle income teachers and low income students. I saw the books as something students would treasure. He saw them as a commodity. Perhaps treasures, like hankies when I was in grade two, are beyond his expectations. If you haven't lain awake recently, wondering how you are going to feed and clothe your children, it might be difficult to imagine living a life without reading materials. They seem ubiquitous to most of us. Over the past three years I have had conversations with friends, family, colleagues, even strangers at bus stops, about the need for all children to have access to books. A number of times I have been

told that books are available to everyone. I do not believe that to be true. It is not an observation that is supported by my own experience or by the research. It is time to act. It is time we stopped locking up the books.

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Appendix

Eagle Elementary

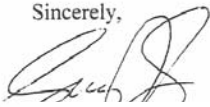
School Address
School Phone Numbers

May 20, 2004

Dear Parent/Guardian:

Eagle Elementary is taking part in a reading study. Please read the attached document and return the permission slip giving your permission or requesting that your children not be included. Please call if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



Principal's name
Eagle Elementary Principal
Phone number:

Keep this page at home

School Library Summer Program Study

What Is It?

We want to know if opening our library over the summer will help children be better readers. Terri Chalaturnyk, a teacher in our district, will be doing a study to answer this question, as part of her Masters program at the University of Alberta and XXXXX, the school principal, will be working with her.

If you and your child agree to participate:

1. The school will provide Terri with information about your child. We will tell her your child's age, grade, sex, postal code, and share your child's spring and fall 2004 reading tests. We will also identify which children are First Nations.
2. If your child comes to the program in the summer, Terri will also collect information on their attendance, the books they read, and what they say about what they are reading. Pictures may be taken during the school library summer program. They will not be used outside the school without your permission.
3. Terri and XXXXX will follow the rules set up by School District #XX and the University of Alberta for this project. All information they collect will be kept private.

Your Rights

Your child does not have to be part of the research project. Your child will still be able to come to the school library summer reading program, even if they are not in the study.

You can decide at any time to drop out of the study. Just call the school or send us a note to let us know. Your child's information will not be used if you decide to drop out of the study.

You and your child have a right to privacy. None of the information collected will be shared with anyone else. Your child's name will not be used in the paper that Terri writes at the end of the project. Nothing will be included in the paper that will make it possible to identify your child. Terri will securely store the information she collects and will not allow anyone else access to it.

The Report

Terri will report her findings at a public meeting at XXXX Elementary. She will give copies of the report to parents, the XXXX Elementary staff, to school district staff, the School Board, the University of Alberta, and the University of Alberta Library. The report or information on the summer library program may be posted to a website. Terri will use the report and what she learns about summer library programs in presentations, workshops, and classes. She may also write articles for magazines, and educational journals. Your child's name will not be used in any of these activities. No information that identifies your child will be included in any of these activities.

Call Us

If you decide to drop out of the study, or if you have concerns, complaints, or just want to talk about the project please call.

Names/phone numbers and mailing addresses were provided here for Terri, the school principal, and the U of A faculty advisor.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculties of Education and Extension Research Ethics Board (EE REB) at the University of Alberta. For question regarding participants rights and ethical conduct of research, contact the Chair of the EE REB at (780) 429-3751.

Student's Name _____ Return this page to XXXX Elementary School

Letter of Consent

1. I understand that the XXXX Elementary Summer Library program is open to all XXXX Elementary families and their guests. Students do not need to take part in the study to attend the summer program.
2. I understand that even if after agreeing to be part of the study the parent/guardian or the student can still change their mind at any time.
3. I understand that student's names will not be used in any publication. No information which could be used to identify a student will be included in any publication.
4. I understand that if I agree to participate the school will give Terri Chalaturnyk information on the age, grade, sex, postal code, and spring and fall 2004 reading tests of the student. The school will also identify First Nations students.
5. I understand that if I agree to participate, and the student attends the summer library program, Terri Chalaturnyk will gather information on attendance, books read, and student comments on the books, or the program.
6. I understand that both the parent/guardian and the student must agree to be part of the study before the student is included.

Please sign and date your acceptance or refusal below.

I agree to be part of the XXXX Elementary summer reading research project.

Parent/Guardian Signature

Date

Student Signature

Date

I do not want to be part of the XXXX Elementary summer reading research project.

Parent/Guardian Signature

Date

Student Signature

Date