SUMMER READING LISTS: RESEARCH AND RECOMMENDATIONS

SARAH LINDLEY, REBECCA M. GILES, AND KARYN TUNKS

ABSTRACT

Decades of research have focused on the impact of summer learning loss and effective tools in stemming the flow of knowledge lost during summer break. While reading lists have become a standard practice for addressing students' needs to maintain learning levels over the summer months, very little research has been conducted on the book lists themselves. This study examined the books chosen for the summer reading lists for rising eighth graders in a single district. Several variables, including reading level, word count, interest level, author gender, category, and publication date were investigated. The findings suggest that the reading lists are quite varied, possibly as a result of each school's purpose or area of focus when compiling their individual lists. Recommendations for creating quality book lists for any grade level are provided.

Summer reading lists are a quintessential part of almost every student's learning experience from elementary through high school. They can be found as far back as 1901 (Bertin, 2004) and seem to have originated not in schools but in public libraries. Since the emergence of these lists, they have existed in many forms. While it is hoped that summer reading lists will foster a love of reading, it is also theorized that summer reading will help prevent the backslide in achievement, known as summer learning loss (Lu, 2009), that many students experience during the two-month break from school.

SUMMER LEARNING LOSS

Summer learning loss is the decline of knowledge and academic skills during the lengthy summer break that "limits cumulative gains over time and creates a barrier to schools' effectiveness" (Jesson, McNaughton, & Kolose, 2014, p. 45). "The long term summer vacation breaks the rhythm of instruction, leads to forgetting, and requires a significant amount of review when students return to school in the fall" (Cooper, 2003, p. 2). There are several possible reasons for students' academic regression during the summer break. One cause could very well lie in the structure of the school calendar itself. Winters (1995) reported an improvement in reading and math for 88% of schools that used a year-round calendar, and there were no losses in either of these academic areas. Several researchers have investigated the possible correlation between students' socioeconomic status and the amount of knowledge retained over the summer. Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsay, and Greathouse (1996) found that students lost about one month of instructional progress in math over the summer months regardless of income level. Socioeconomic differences, however, presented themselves in retention of reading comprehension. While reading comprehension declined for all students, the rate of decline was more pronounced for students in lower income households, who showed as much as three months of grade-level equivalency loss in reading comprehension over the summer.

"Often, it is the students who can least afford to lose the reading gains they've achieved during the school year who fall the farthest behind when they return to the classroom after a summer break away from formal literacy instruction" (Mraz & Rasinski, 2007, p. 784). Allington and McGill-Franzen (2003; 2013) reported that low-income children lose about two months of reading skills during the summer, while their higher socioeconomic peers show slight gains. Downey, von Hippel, and Broh (2004) found that "schooling…reduce[s] the rate at which inequality grows, compared to the rate when school is out of session" (p. 632). Similarly, Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson (2007) found that during the school year, lower-income students kept pace with their higher-income peers but lost reading skills during the summer while their higher-income peers' skills increased or stayed the same.

Entwisle, Alexander, and Olson (2001) used the "faucet theory" to explain students' losses during the summer months. This theory suggests that lower-income students may have fewer opportunities for academic growth, and their development can be turned on during the academic year but turned off during the summer break. Because lower-income families do not always contribute the same level of resources and learning opportunities as higher-income families, their children's achievement potentially stagnates or even declines. In contrast, higher-income families might have a greater ability to supplement learning with numerous resources, so their children's achievement grows, albeit at a slower pace than during the school year.

Access to reading materials is essential to enhancing children's reading development (Mraz & Rasinski, 2007). When elementary students from high-poverty schools were randomly selected to receive a supply of self-selected trade books on the final day of school over a three-year period, they scored significantly higher on the state reading assessment than a control group of students from these same schools who did not receive books (Allington, R. L., McGill-Franzena, A., Camilli, G. et al., 2010).

Additionally, elements common to socioeconomic status have a profound influence on students' learning environment at home (Lareau, 1987). Children from lower-income families often own fewer books, are read to less frequently, and watch more television than do their higher-income peers. In short, the home environment of low-income students may be less conducive to promoting summer achievement gains than the environments of their higher-income peers (Von Drehle, 2010). Other factors contributing to summer learning loss include parental ethnicity and educational level, as well as grade level, home language, and special education status (Alexander et al., 2007; Allinder & Fuchs, 1994).

Students' Reading Motivation

Motivation can be defined as "an inner ability, a stimulus that pushes a person to take action to achieve a goal" (Ülper, 2011, p. 954). Discovering the aforementioned stimulus is important to the reading process as a whole. As with summer learning loss, multiple factors influence students' reading motivation. Attitudes toward reading can vary depending on the context, either in or outside of school (McKenna & Kear, 1990), students' age (Folmer et al., 2008), and the amount of choice students have regarding what they read (Ivey and Broaddus, 2001). For the most part, the adolescent attitude toward reading has been depicted as one of indifference when compared to the attitudes of younger students (McKenna, Kear, & Ellsworth, 1995); however, Ivey and Broaddus (2001) found that sixth graders valued independent reading and were also highly motivated to read when given the opportunity to read materials that interested them. Likewise, Oldfather (1993) determined that when early adolescents were allowed to choose how and what they read, they often made personal investments in their literary activities.

The National Reading Panel (2000) concluded that the more time students spend reading, the stronger their skills are in comprehension, vocabulary, and fluency. As a result, "encouraging voluntary reading during summer vacation may be one useful strategy for helping struggling readers acquire the skills needed to succeed in school" (Kim, 2006, p. 31). Heyns (1978) concluded that the number of books seventh and eighth graders read during the summer break is directly related to their academic gains during those same months. Unfortunately, only 17 percent of students report that they read in the summer without being assigned to do so (Hughes-Hassell & Rodge, 2007).

The key for summer reading to stem the flow of knowledge loss during the long break may be connecting students with books they enjoy reading as a way to help keep the learning faucet open (Entwisle et al., 2001). There is disagreement, however, regarding the level of independence that should be allowed during summer reading. Krashen (2001) argues that students should be allowed to choose what they read and that there should not be a proscribed list or any form of accountability. In contrast, Miller (2007) suggests that there must be adult involvement in the selection of summer books to ensure the appropriate level of challenge and interest. It is through this later train of thought that the prominence of assigned summer reading lists has emerged.

Williams (2002; 2003), who examined 2,215 different titles on summer reading lists from 57 Connecticut schools, concluded that the lists "were dominated by dead white male authors, adult books published more than ten years ago, and requirements to read certain books, with little free reading choice" (p. 369). Williams (2002) also found that the lists in her study ranged from 43 percent to 93 percent fiction, thus, disregarding the preference for nonfiction of many male students (Gurian, 2001). These findings conveyed that students are not able to freely choose their summer reading material and, consequently, are not able to function as independent learners (Lu, 2009). A quality summer reading list can enable students to choose wisely by facilitating, as opposed to dictating, their selection of books.

This study examined the books on summer reading lists for rising (or soon to be) eighth graders to identify possible quantitative and qualitative differences among the lists. Specifically, the variables of reading level, word count, interest level, category, gender of author, publication dates, and Newbery award status were examined.

METHODS

MATERIALS

Eighty-two books from the summer reading lists for rising eighth graders in twelve middle schools (6th-8th grades) in a single school district were examined. As shown in Table 1, the schools varied in both type, as designated by the National Center for Educational Statistics 2013-2014, and size. School size classification was based on total enrollment, which ranged from 400 to more than 1,600 students. A school with a student enrollment of 499 or fewer students was classified as small; a medium school had between 500 and 999 students, and a large school had more than 1,000 students. There were two magnet schools with the designations Performing Arts and College Prep.

DESIGN AND PROCEDURES

All 19 middle schools in the geographically largest district in one southeastern state were contacted by email requesting a summer reading list for rising eighth graders. After follow-up phone calls, reading lists were obtained from 13 schools for a response rate of 68%. One large, rural school was

eliminated as a participant because no data (i.e., word count, reading level, etc.) was available for the books on its summer reading list.

There were a total of 82 books on the twelve lists examined. Due to repetition of some titles, data – reading level, word count, interest level, genre, author's gender, year of publication, and Newbery status – was obtained for 72 different books from the AR Book Finder™ website operated by Renaissance Learning, Inc. Traditionally, books are classified by genre, but some books in the Accelerated Reader™ database were designated as Classic Fiction. Since this is not a traditional genre, the term category rather than genre was used to include this nontraditional classification.

RESULTS

Of the twelve schools in this study, six were urban. Three urban schools were small, two were medium, and one was large. Within the four suburban schools, three were medium, and one was large. One rural school was small, and one was medium sized. A small, urban school had the smallest amount of books, with just one listed, while a large, suburban school had the most with 18.

Table 1
School and Book List Demographics

SCHOOL	TYPE	SIZE	Number of Books	Number of Categories	Publication Range	Newberry Honor or Award
1	Suburban	Large	18	6	1868-2013	3
2	Urban	Small	14	4	1931-2006	0
3	Urban	Large	7	4	1975-2008	0
4*	Urban	Medium	10	3	1987-2008	3
5	Urban	Small	1	1	1967	0
6	Rural	Medium	2	2	1883-1981	0
7	Suburban	Medium	3	2	1998-2008	0
8	Rural	Small	4	2	1883-2006	1
9	Urban	Small	6	3	2000-2008	1
10	Suburban	Medium	2	1	1981-1988	1
11	Suburban	Medium	3	1	1981-2002	1
12**	Urban	Medium	11	5	1937-2008	2

*Performing Arts Magnet **College Prep Magnet

There was a wide degree of diversity in the twelve schools' summer reading lists for rising eighth graders. This information can also be found in Table 1. The books listed were published between 1868 and 2013. The oldest book was *Little Women*, and the most recently published book was *Courage Has No Color: The True Story of The Triple Nickels, America's First Black Paratroopers*. Only one school included a book published in the last five years, and only three schools included books published prior to the twentieth century. Seven schools listed at least one book that had been recognized with either the Newbery Medal or Newbery Honor Seal. The two books appearing most

frequently (listed three times each) were *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson and *Homecoming* by Cynthia Voigt.

The word count, reading level, and interest level of the books on each participating school's reading list are presented in Table 2. A large, urban school (3) had the book with the lowest reading level (3.6), while schools 1, 6, and 8 all included *Treasure Island,* which had the highest reading level (8.3). A medium, suburban school (10) had the lowest mean reading level of 4.1. The highest mean reading level was 6.5, this from a small, rural school (8). Three schools had a mean reading level at the middle school (6th grade) level. A small, urban school (9) had both the shortest book (3,016 words) and the lowest mean word count (27,431 words). A large, urban school (1) had the longest book (183,833 words), and the list from a medium, rural school (6) had the highest mean word count with 88,922 words. Table 2 also shows the number of books in each interest level category. The percentage of the number of books at each interest levels are represented parenthetically. Five schools had books in the 9th to 12th grade interest level.

Table 2
Description of Books

SCHOOL	Word Count		Reading Level		Interest Level		
	Range	Mean	Range	Mean	4th - 8th	6th +	9th - 12th
1	8,166 - 183,833	65,331	4.3 - 8.3	6.4	10 (55%)	3 (17%)	5 (28%)
2	26,282 - 114,157	63,889	4.0 - 8.2	5.4	1 (7%)	1 (7%)	12 (86%)
3	26,820 - 89,272	62,641	3.6 - 5.6	4.7	5 (72%)	1 (14%)	1 (14%)
4*	19,756 - 76,093	46,780	4.4 - 6.2	5.2	7 (70%)	3 (30%)	0
5	48,523 - 48,523	48,523	0	4.7	0	0	1 (100%)
6	66,950 - 110.893	88,922	4.4 - 8.3	6.3	2 (100%)	0	0
7	32,127 - 59.017	48,524	4.8 - 5.4	5.1	3 (100%)	0	0
8	17,509 - 75,314	54,515	4.1 - 8.3	6.5	4 (100%)	0	0
9	3,016 - 73,044	27,431	4.4 - 5.4	5.1	4 (67%)	2 (33%)	0
10	44,653 - 110,893	77,773	3.7 - 4.4	4.1	1 (50%)	1 (50%)	0
11	44,653 - 110,893	72,220	3.7 - 5.2	4.4	2 (67%)	1 (33%)	0
12**	30,900 - 99,750	58,053	4.4 - 6.6	5.4	3 (27%)	1 (9%)	7 (64%)

*Performing Arts Magnet **College Prep Magnet

The number of books listed in each category is reported in Table 3. Realistic Fiction was the only category represented on all twelve lists. Six schools (50%) listed Science Fiction books. Half, six, of the schools limited the books listed to only one or two categories, while three schools included books from four or more categories. The list from 10 schools (83%) included an equal number of or more female authors than males (Table 4).

Table 3
Number and Percentage of Books in Each Category

SCHOOL	Realistic Fiction	Historical Fiction	Classic Fiction	Science Fiction	Fantasy	Non-fiction
1	5 (28%)	3 (17%)	3 (17%)	1 (5%)	2 (11%)	4 (22%)
2	8 (58%)	2 (14%)	0	0	2 (14%)	2 (14%)
3	1 (14%)	4 (57%)	0	1 (14%)	0	1 (14%)
4*	7 (70%)	2 (20%)	0	1 (10%)	0	0
5	1 (100%)	0	0	0	0	0
6	1 (50%)	0	1 (50%)	0	0	0
7	1 (33%)	0	0	2 (67%)	0	0
8	2 (50%)	0	2 (50%)	0	0	0
9	2 (33%)	0	0	1 (17%)	0	3 (50%)
10	2 (100%)	0	0	0	0	0
11	3 (100%)	0	0	0	0	0
12**	5 (46%)	2 (18%)	0	1 (9%)	2 (18%)	1 (9%)

*Performing Arts Magnet **College Prep Magnet

Table 4
Gender of Authors

SCHOOL	Author Gender	
	Male	Female
1	8	10
2	5	9
3	3	4
4*	5	5
5	0	1
6	1	1
7	1	2
8	3	1
9	2	4
10	1	1
11	2	1
12**	5	6

*Performing Arts Magnet
**College Prep Magnet

DISCUSSION

Interestingly, the mean reading level of all the book lists examined was below the grade level (4.1-6.5) of the intended students. While the students are rising eighth graders, the purpose for identifying books with lower reading levels could be to provide the students with less demanding reading. This type of easy, recreational reading is beneficial because students may be less likely to want to read and/or less likely to be successful in comprehending more challenging books when reading independently. Providing books with lower reading levels is also a way to include those students who read below grade level. Conversely, it is also important that books of higher reading levels be included on summer reading lists. Books on higher levels typically have more varied language and complex sentence structure, possibly making them more appealing to avid readers. Further, the relaxed pace of summer reading provides more time for students to digest and understand demanding, thought-provoking books. Students are more motivated to read when they can connect what they are reading to their personal interests (Ivey & Broaddus, 2001), and eleven of the twelve lists included books that were on a middle-school students' interest level (4-8).

The large variety of book lengths, as shown by word count ranges, is a manifestation of giving students more freedom of choice, which increases reading motivation (Oldfather, 1993). Shorter books may appear less threatening to struggling readers who may be intimidated by a large number of pages while enthusiastic readers may relish the opportunity to tackle a lengthy novel. Although a small, urban school listed books with the lowest word count, the reading level of these

books was average when compared to the other lists in this study. Curiously, a medium, rural school, rather than the college prep magnet school, had one of the highest mean reading levels, as well as the highest mean word count, which was significantly higher (more than 11,000 words) than the mean word count of any other list.

A large, suburban school had the largest number of books (18) and the widest variety of categories (six). By giving students fewer categories of books to choose from, those who compile the lists have more control over what the students are reading. Severely limiting the choice of books with only one or two titles could be an indication that the students will have an assignment to complete specifically related to the book(s) read either during the summer or upon returning to school. It would appear that school 6 is more concerned with fostering a love of reading in its students rather than selecting books for specific assignments. The college prep magnet was the only other school that included books from more than four categories. Further, books on the college prep magnet school's list had a high interest level but did not offer challenges in length or difficulty

The finding that only five book lists included nonfiction texts coincides with Williams' (2002) claims that summer reading lists contain a vast majority of fictional texts. It is recommended that future summer reading lists contain more nonfiction in order to incorporate the interests of more students. In contrast to Williams' (2003) findings that most summer reading lists are dominated by male authors, only two schools had book lists whose authorship was less than 50% female. This change could be attributed to an increased awareness in the contribution of female authors in the realm of young adult literature resulting from the recent and dramatic rise of talented female authors such as J. K. Rowling, Suzanne Collins, and Stephanie Meyer.

Similar to Williams' (2003) conclusion that summer reading lists are saturated with books published more than ten years ago, only one reading list included a book written in the last five years. It is recommended those (i.e., library media specialist, teachers, etc.) responsible for identifying books on summer reading lists make annual revisions for the purpose of keeping the lists current. The International Literacy Association's annual Young Adult's Choice Reading List can be consulted to learn what students are currently recommending.

Students and parents need to be informed that summer reading lists are not to be ignored or completed grudgingly. It is hoped that parents might recognize the value of these lists and encourage their children's at-home reading during the summer months.

The collective findings of this study can be beneficial to individuals responsible for creating summer reading lists for students of any age. To this end, a Summer Reading Checklist (see Appendix) for assessing the quality of a school's book choices on its summer reading list was created. Using this checklist to evaluate variables such as reading level, word count, interest level, and publication dates of books selected could significantly increase the quality of summer reading lists and, ultimately, students' summer reading.

REFERENCES

Alexander, K. L., Entwisle, D. R., & Olson, L. S. (2007). Lasting consequences of the summer learning gap. *American Sociological Review, 72*(2), 167-180.

Allinder, R. M., & Fuchs, L. S. (1994). Alternative ways of analyzing effects of a short school break on students with and without disabilities. *School Psychology Quarterly*, *9*(2), 145-160.

Allington, R. L., & McGill-Franzen, A. (2003). The impact of summer reading setback on the reading achievement gap. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *85*(1), 68-75.

Allington, R. L., & McGill-Franzen, A. (Eds.). (2013). *Summer reading: Closing the rich/poor reading achievement gap.* Teachers College Press. New York.

Allington, R., L., McGill-Franzena, A., Camilli, G., Williams, L., Graff, J., Zeig, J. . . . Nowak, R. (2010). Addressing summer reading setback among economically disadvantaged elementary students. *Reading Psychology, 31*(5), 411-427. DOI: 10.1080/02702711.2010.505165

Bertin, S. (2004). A history of youth summer reading programs in public libraries. Master's Paper for the School of Information and Library Science, UNC-Chapel Hill.

Cooper, H., Nye, B., Charlton, K., Lindsay, J., & Greathouse, S. (1996). The effects of summer vacation on achievement test scores: a narrative and meta-analytic review. *Review of Educational Research, 66*(3), 227-268.

Cooper, H. (2003). *Summer learning loss:* The problem and some solutions. ERIC Digest, (Report No. EDO-PS-03-5). (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED475391). Retrieved from ERIC database.

Downey, D. B., von Hippel, P. T., & Broh, B. (2004). Are schools the great equalizer? School and non-school sources of inequality in cognitive skills. *American Sociological Review, 69*(5), 613-635.

Entwisle, D. R, Alexander, K. L., & Olson, L. S. (2001). Keeping the faucet flowing: summer learning and the home environment. *American Educator, 25*(3), 10-15.

Folmer, A. S., Cole, D. A., Sigal, A. B., Benbow, L. D ., Satterwhite, L. F., Swygert, K. E. (2008). Age-related changes in children's understanding of effort and ability: Implications for attribution theory and motivation. *Journal of Experimental Child, 99*(2), 114-134.

Gurian, M. (2001). *Boy and girls learn differently: A guide for teachers and parents.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Heyns, B. (1978). *Summer learning and the effects of schooling.* New York: Academic Press.

Hughes-Hassell, S., & Rodge, P. (2007). The leisure reading habits of urban adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy, 51,* 22-33.

Ivey, G., & Broaddus, K. (2001). Just plain reading: a survey of what makes students what to read in the middle school classrooms. *Reading Research Quarterly* 2001: 350.

Jesson, R., McNaughton, S., & Kolose, T. (2014). Investigating the summer learning effect in low SES schools. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy*, *37*, 45-54.

Krashen, S. (2001). The testing movement and delayed gratification. *Educators for Urban Minorities, 2*(1), 48-50.

Lareau, A. (1987). Social class difference in family social relationships: the importance of cultural capital. *Sociology of Education, 60,* 73-85.

Lu, Y. (2009). Engaging students with summer reading: An assessment of a collaborative high school summer reading program. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science, 50*(2), 90-106.

McKenna, M. C., & Kear, D. J. (1990). Measuring attitude toward reading: a new tool for teachers. *The Reading Teacher, 43*(8), 626-639.

McKenna, M. C., Kear, D. J., & Ellsworth, R. A. (1995). Children's attitudes toward reading: a national survey. *Reading Research Quarterly, 30*(4), 934-956.

Miller, B. M., (2007). The learning season: the untapped power of summer to advance student achievement. National Center for Educational Statistics. http://dmlcentral.net/wp-content/uploads/files/Learning_Season_ES.pdf

Mraz, M., & Ransinski, T. V. (2007) Summer reading loss. *The Reading Teacher, 60*(8), 784-789. doi:10.1598/RT.60.8.9

National Reading Panel. (2000). *Teaching children to read: an evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction.* Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office.

Oldfather, P. (1993). What students say about motivating experiences in a whole language classroom. *The Reading Teacher, 46,* 672-681.

Ülper, H. (2011). The motivational factors for reading in terms of students. *Educational Sciences: Theory and Practice, 11*(2), 954-960.

Von Drehle, D. (July 22, 2010). The case against summer vacation. *Time*. http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2005863,00.html

Williams, L. (2002). How I spent my summer vacation-with school reading lists. *Voice of Youth Advocates, 24*(6), 416-421.

Williams, L. (2003). Summer belongs in the hands of the students: Celebrating choice in school reading lists. *Voice of Youth Advocates, 26*(5), 368-371.

Winters, W. (1995). *A Review of Recent Studies Relating to the Achievement of Students Enrolled in Year-Round Education Programmes.* San Diego: NAYRE. *Psychology, 99,* 114-134.

AUTHORS

Sarah Lindley, University of South Alabama, scl1002@jagmail.southalabama.edu

Rebecca M. Giles, Ph.D., University of South Alabama, rgiles@southalabama.edu

Karyn W. Tunks, Ph.D., University of South Alabama, ktunks@southalabama.edu

APPENDIX A

Summer Reading Checklist

School: _____

Grade Level: ____

Consider the following when creating a summer reading list.

QUESTION	YES/ NO	COMMENTS
Does my list include books both above and below reading level?		
Does my list include books of different lengths/difficulty?		
Does my list include books from a variety of categories, including nonfiction?		
Does my list include any books written in the last 5 years?		
Does my list include books by both male and female authors?		
Does my list include any award-winning books?		
Are the books on my list ones that students will be engaged with?		

If no was answered to any of the questions, consider revising or expanding book choices to include at least one book that fits the criteria.