

## **Why Do Poor Students Lag Behind Rich Students in Reading Development?**

**By Richard L. Allington, Ph.D., and Anne McGill-Franzen, Ph.D.**

According to a recent National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report, 12<sup>th</sup>-grade students from low-income families read four years below middle-class 12<sup>th</sup>-graders. In fact, their reading performance in 12<sup>th</sup> grade is equal to the performance of middle-class 8<sup>th</sup>-grade students! In the U.S., as is the case in every other nation, kids from low-income families do not read as well as kids from more affluent families. So the question one has to attempt to answer is this: Why do low-income students lag behind middle/upper-income students in reading development?

Various popular theories abound in attempting to answer this question. For the longest period of time, the parents were thought to be the problem. More recently, it is teachers of low-income children who have been identified as the problem. That is, teachers in high-poverty schools are either not as talented as teachers in suburban schools or teachers in high-poverty schools simply do not work as hard as teachers in suburban schools. This line of hypothesizing has led to schemes whereby all teachers will be paid (or retained in employment) only when their students make good progress with reading development.

The problem with these popular theories is that they have both been proven wrong by the evidence we already have available.

Evidence that, it seems, no one in the U.S. Department of Education is familiar with and evidence that has also escaped being noticed by the folks who run state departments of education. That is, I know of not a single federal- or state-developed plan for addressing the actual problem that underlies the rich/poor reading achievement gap.

### ***The Primary Source of the Rich/Poor Reading Achievement Gap***

What has become clear over the past 35 years is that low-income students learn as much during each school year as do middle-class students (Alexander, Entwisle & Olson, 2007; Hayes & Grether, 1983; Heyns, 1978). But every summer, when school is not in session, kids from low-income families lose two or three months of reading growth, and middle-class kids add a month of reading growth. This means that even when schools for kids in both high-income and low-income families are equally effective, summer reading loss widens the reading achievement gap that existed when these children began kindergarten.

Why is there this family economic trigger that creates summer reading loss, and is there a way to neutralize that trigger and end the summer reading loss that kids in low-income families experience? The answers to this two-part question are now reasonably

clear. Students from lower-income families experience summer reading loss because they don't read much, if at all, during the summer months. Students from middle-class families, on the other hand, are far more likely to read during this same summer period. Low-income students don't read during the summer months because they don't own any books, and they live in neighborhoods where there are few, if any, places to purchase books. Middle-class students have bedroom libraries and live in neighborhoods where children's books are readily available, even in the grocery stores where their parents shop. Middle-class kids are more likely to live in a neighborhood where one can find a child-friendly public library than is the case with children living in low-income areas. These children live in neighborhoods best described as book deserts.

Historically, low-income students relied primarily on schools as sources for the books they read. Ironically, too many high-poverty schools have small libraries, and there are too many classrooms that have no classroom library for kids to select books to read. Too many high-poverty schools ban library books (and textbooks) from leaving the building (fear of loss of the books, I'm usually told). However, even with fewer books in their schools and more restrictive book-lending policies, these kids do get most of the books they read from the schools they attend. But not during the summer months when school is not in session! Even when there is a summer school program operating, the school library typically remains closed. So the question we must ask is this: Where are children from low-income families supposed to get books to read during the summer months?

We organized spring book fairs in 17 high-poverty elementary schools (between 400 and 600 book titles were available at each book fair) and randomly selected roughly 1,000 students to self-select the 15 books they would be given on the last day of school, just as summer vacation began. We also selected a similar number of children to serve as control students. These kids did not get any books on the final day of the school year. The children were completing either 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> grade when we began the study, which then ran for three consecutive years.

When the study began, the two groups were at similar levels of reading development. But after three consecutive summers of easy access to self-selected books, the kids with access to books read significantly better than the control (no books) kids. The difference between the two groups' reading development was roughly a half-year. In other words, providing poorer students with easy access to books literally ameliorated summer reading loss! As fulfilling as this result was, we found it even more fulfilling that the achievement growth of the poorest students (those eligible for free lunches) was twice as large as the general effect. This effect and the effects others have reported indicate that it is primarily the children from low-income families who benefit from summer book distributions (Allington, McGill-Franzen, Camilli, Williams, Graff, Zeig, Zmach & Nowak, 2010; Kim & Quinn, 2013; White, Kim, Kingston & Foster, 2014).

It is also important to note that the gains in our summer book distribution study were as large as the typical gains generated by attending summer school (Cooper, et al, 1996).

Of course, our project cost much less than summer school attendance. Roughly \$50 per child, per summer, is what it cost to run the book fairs and summer book distribution. It is also important to note that we did not require students to write book reports or take quizzes on the books they selected. All we really did was create a process such that children in low-income families were given easy access to books they wanted to read during the summer vacation period.

Finally, I'll close this short summary by noting that our study differed from virtually every other study of summer book distribution in two ways. First, the children in our study were younger than the students others have used (often it seems as though students in grades 4, 5 and 6 have been the kids getting summer books, not in grades 1, 2, 3 and 4, as was the case in our study). Second, we have been the only summer books study that allowed our participants to self-select the books they would receive (other studies have simply distributed the same sets of books to all students or tried matching kids using their reading levels and responses on an interest inventory). We think both of these factors, unique to our study, are the reasons we found that distributing summer books solved the problem of summer reading loss (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2013).

In our view, the summer reading loss and the widening rich/poor reading achievement gap are both solvable problems. But few schools seem to have implemented any strategy to attempt to equalize children's access to books during the summer months. It is not the case that our books distribution effort was so expensive that schools simply cannot afford it. I'm not sure why, after 35 years, summer reading loss and book access remain serious problems for children from low-income families. Likewise I'm not sure why it is that virtually no action to address this problem has been taken at the federal, state or local school district level.

What I am sure of is that it is patently unfair to blame kids or their parents or their teachers for the rich/poor reading achievement gap.

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