Need to Read: Overcoming Summer Reading Loss

As the weather turns warmer and students in schools begin to think about summer, educators will want to gear up to support summer reading opportunities. The benefits of summer reading are well documented. When students read during summer months they typically gain an average of a month of reading achievement; however, students who do not read during summer months lose two months of reading achievement. This yearly process of summer loss continues to add up throughout elementary and middle school and accounts for a large proportion of differences in student reading achievement. Summer reading loss is particularly significant among students living in poverty.

The book, No More Summer Reading Loss by Cahill, Horvath, McGill-Franzen and Allington (2013) is an appeal for teachers and reading leaders to help students become immersed in reading over the summer months. This book, which is part of the series, provides research-based suggestions to guide implementation of a successful summer reading program. Suggestions are listed below.

1. Put books in students’ hands for the summer. The common approach of handing a recommended summer reading list to students may support some students, but it doesn’t help students who don’t have access to print materials. A significant obstacle for summer reading is the limited amount of reading materials that are available to children at home, and this lack of access to summer materials has been shown to result in lower academic achievement. Ensure that students have access to print materials at home over the summer months by handing students books they can keep. Book ownership, rather than lending programs, contributes more significantly to increased attitudes, volume of reading, and accelerated development among children.

2. Provide student choice. Student choice in reading materials makes one of the biggest contributions to reading achievement. For example, children who are given choice have demonstrated twice the reading gains compared to children who were not given choice. Also, providing free self-selected books for summer
reading has improved reading achievement for students in a manner similar to three years of summer school\(^2\). When providing a choice of texts, gather a wide range of options in topics, genres, and reading levels from which students can make a selection.

Students and faculty in the children’s and adolescent literature area of Literacy Education at the U of MN shared some of their ideas about interesting books you might want to check out to share with your students. Emily Midkiff offers some recommended science fiction at her own site, especially if your students may be interested in the upcoming Star Wars movie. Sara Sterner suggests checking out the Reading Without Walls campaign, a nationwide program celebrating reading and diversity, explained here by cartoonist Gene Luen Yang, the National Ambassador for Young People’s Literature. And check out this great list of literature resources compiled by Laura Lemanski and her colleagues. The more educators explore and share with students, the wider the world of choices become! See the links following this research brief for even more resources offered by professor Marek Oziewicz to open up your awareness of children’s and young adults’ literature.

3. **Support student choice.** Educators play an important role in student choice. Explore books with children and find out if an individual prefers reading about true or imaginary things, humorous or scary things. Ask students if they prefer books about animals, superheroes, or monsters. Studies have shown that elementary-aged children tend to select books based on interesting topics, pop-culture, humor, and fascinating visual features; middle school students, on the other hand, start to select books with more mature topics. Across all grades, the most popular books are series books. Whatever the book choice, it is better for students to read a few books they love rather than a large number of books that don’t appeal to them\(^8\).

4. **Make Reading a Family Affair.** Some parents wonder if they are qualified to support their children’s reading, and other parents focus too heavily on reading accuracy or completing workbooks at the expense of reading for meaning and enjoyment\(^8\). A reading specialist or teacher can bring meaningful summer reading to the whole family. One way is through a theme-based book bag that includes a collaborative journal to record family impressions of books. As new families read books from the book bag, they can read the comments of previous families. Schools can also bring families together around summer reading with a “Breakfast and Books” event. During this event, students and families sit and read together and discuss their favorite books. Also, summer reading provides an opportunity for celebrating transnational and bilingual literacy among families who speak and read more than one language\(^8\).

5. **Support personal goals and social interaction.** Motivation is a key factor in summer reading. Educators can support motivation by asking students to create personal reading goals or quests for knowledge about a topic. Facilitate social interaction during the summer months by providing reading pen pals, book exchanges, book clubs, and student blogs.

6. **Foster independent reading throughout the school year.** Often, a lack of summer reading is an indication of how well students have developed as independent readers during the school year. It is important for educators to broaden the definition of successful reading to go beyond decoding accuracy and fluency. Be careful not to overemphasize whole-class reading, narrowly leveled texts, fiction as the most common reading genre, and isolated skill instruction. Instead, teach reading strategies so that students know what to do when they encounter difficulty with a book. Provide time each day in school for students to make choices about texts and read independently. In addition, give time for students to write and talk with their peers about their reading. Model reading as a joyful experience that connects us to others and helps us grow.
For some new summer reading recommendations, check out the links provided below from Professor Oziewicz. I heard great things about the read-around-the-world experience: parents or librarians compiling lists of children’s books reflecting cultures and places all over the planet. There are many websites that cover iterations of that idea, for example, delightfulchildrensbooks.com (and then the read around the world tab).

**My special new recommendations include:**

- Craig Russell’s *Fragment* a suspenseful YA cli-fi, or “climate science fiction”
- Aleksandra Mizielinska and Daniel Mizielinski’s brilliant picturebook informational album for elementary readers *Under Water*
- Emily Gravett’s early readers picturebook *Tidy*

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**Citations**