



“Somebody Signed Me Up”

North Carolina Fourth-Graders’ Perceptions of Summer Reading Programs

KIM BECNEL, ROBIN A. MOELLER, AND NITA J. MATZEN

The long-term goal of the researchers involved in this study is to discover methods that public libraries can use to improve their summer reading programs (SRP) and expand participation of students from traditionally under-represented groups. This small pilot study was designed to answer some important preliminary questions: How do children decide whether or not to participate in SRPs? What motivates children to participate and what barriers might inhibit participation? Finally, what factors might motivate those who do not participate to take part?

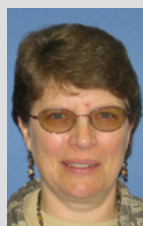
To answer these questions, researchers conducted focus groups with fourth-grade students who had participated in their local public library’s summer reading program and those who had not. The results enhance the current picture of SRP participants and add a new piece to the puzzle by beginning to describe the nonparticipant population as well.

With library budgets growing ever tighter, public libraries are being asked to provide evidence to justify the existence of some of their most revered programs and services, such as the annual summer reading program, which typically involves asking children to read a certain number of books in exchange for modest prizes. To comply with this request, librarians and scholars have begun to conduct research to try to illustrate the

power of these programs. However, many of these studies have come under fire for demonstrating only what we already know:¹ Children who read more, read better.² But do SRPs actually motivate children who otherwise wouldn’t read to do so? And if not, how might they do better?

A recent study by Justice et al., in cooperation with the Columbus Metropolitan Library, begins to answer these crucial questions, finding that the children who participate in SRPs are already typically good readers who come from homes in which reading is a prioritized activity and who have easy access to libraries. The authors noted that future studies should focus on the nonparticipant population with a view toward expanding the reach of SRPs for children who aren’t naturally motivated to read or do not have the resources at home to pursue their reading interests. Indeed, it is through reaching these children that the power of SRPs to close the achievement gap would truly be realized.³

With this in mind, the researchers of this study have sought not only to investigate the motivations of children who participate in SRPs, but to turn the spotlight on the nonparticipant population as well, describing the motivations and barriers they encounter in relationship to summer reading.



Kim Becnel is an Associate Professor of Library Science at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. She teaches and researches in the areas of distance education, public libraries, and youth literacy and literature. Robin A. Moeller is an Associate Professor of Library Science at Appalachian State University. Her research interests are visual representations of information as they apply to youth and schooling, as well as the reading habits and interests of children and young adults. Nita J. Matzen, EdD, was Associate Professor of Library Science at Appalachian State University. She retired in 2016.

The Current Conversation

Reading Motivation Theory

Most researchers who have studied reading motivation and children have reported generally that intrinsic motivation has a much more positive impact on recreational reading than extrinsic motivators. Children who do possess intrinsic motivation to read do so often, work toward becoming better readers, and generally value reading or belonging to a community of readers.⁴ Prior research also suggests that appealing to children's interests and providing them with a variety of choices are much more powerful reading motivation tools than implementing the use of extrinsic motivators such as treats and toys.⁵ Researchers who have examined the use of such external motivators to encourage children to read have noted that they either have no impact or a negative impact on children's motivation to read and that they can turn reading into a competition.⁶

Finally, researchers have noted that when extrinsic motivators have proven to be successful, they are in the form of literacy incentives, in which books are given away as prizes for reaching a goal.⁷

Summer Slide

Research has demonstrated that “summer slide,” the reading fluency loss that occurs while students are away from school, is a significant contributor to the achievement gap between learners of different socioeconomic backgrounds both in the short term and the long term.⁸

Barbara Heys found that while students of all socioeconomic groups progressed at a similar rate during the school year,⁹ disadvantaged students lost considerably more learning than their peers over the summer months. Similarly, Cooper et al. found that while most students see decreases in their learning over the summer equivalent to one month, economically disadvantaged students see a loss of up to three months of learning.¹⁰ The amount of time spent reading has also proven to be a factor in the extent to which summer slide occurs. Anderson, Wilson, and Fielding conducted a study that illustrated that the most accurate predictor of reading improvement is time devoted to reading independently.¹¹ Similarly, in a review of hundreds of studies, the National Reading Panel concluded that reading fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary all increase as time spent reading increases.¹²

Traditional Summer Reading Programs—Measuring Success

While several studies have concluded that SRPs are effective at helping children who participate maintain or improve their reading fluency,¹³ some scholars have pointed out the potential flaws inherent in this type of research. For example, in an Institute of Museum and Library Services-funded research project known as the Dominican Study, the authors lauded the effects of public library SRPs, reporting that youth who had participated in a public library summer reading program had

more motivation, confidence, and skill in reading than did their same-age counterparts and that they achieved better scores on reading tests in the next academic term than they had previously.¹⁴ In a direct response to this report, Lyons pointed to self-selection bias as a major problem of the Dominican Study, noting that the students who chose to participate in the summer reading program had scored higher than students who chose not to participate before the study was conducted, so it is clear there was already some difference between the groups.

Lyons also noted that though the post-summer test scores of the participating group were higher, the scores of nonparticipants had actually risen more over the course of the summer than those of participants, suggesting that the nonparticipants had actually gained more during the summer. Finally, for Lyons, the main takeaway of the study is that libraries are not reaching the population of underserved children in need of reading help and that the focus needs to shift to how well libraries are serving at-risk children and how they can do better.¹⁵

Research conducted in 2013 by Justice et al. echoes these critiques and concerns, finding that the children who tend to participate in SRPs are already strong readers with parental support and abundant literacy resources. They call for additional research into the group of children who do not typically participate in SRPs, including how public libraries can begin to reach them.¹⁶ In a 2015 study, Dynia, Piasta, and Justice found that by the end of the summer, all children in the sample, both those who participated in SRP and those who did not, saw their reading comprehension improve, suggesting that participation did not influence the children's reading development or behaviors. They noted that since children who are inclined to participate in SRPs tend to be strong, motivated readers already, public libraries might be more effective in combatting the issue of summer slide if they were able to reach those children who might be unmotivated or struggling readers, particularly those from less affluent families.¹⁷

Breaking the Mold: Alternative Approaches to Summer Reading

Some libraries have begun to move away from the traditional prize-for-reading SRP model, opting to reward learning experiences and participation in programs, in addition to reading, and to make those rewards literacy-related and/or experiential in nature. An example of this practice can be found at Charlotte Mecklenburg Library (CML), in Charlotte, North Carolina. CML allows a combination of reading time and learning activities to count toward completion of their SRP, for which participants are rewarded with a book and fine waivers. Participants are also eligible to win “grand prizes,” which are tickets to community events and local attractions.¹⁸

Wake County (NC) Public Libraries has shifted its focus to rewarding library interactions, offering children stickers when they “visit a desk, share a favorite book, attend a program, or bring a bag for their books.”¹⁹ There are many other examples of public libraries throughout the country adapting their programs

to better align with what research has to say about reading behaviors and to try to expand the reach of their programs to children who may not typically choose to participate.

Some librarians, like Aimee Meuchel of Washington County (OR) Cooperative Library Services, choose to flip the script even more dramatically, giving away a book as a prize for signing up for SRP. Meuchel argues that this process is more reflective of the spirit and mission of public libraries, which is getting books into the hands of children.²⁰

Methods

The researchers issued a call through professional electronic discussion lists, soliciting help from elementary school librarians willing to arrange focus groups, and they selected at random three schools, all of which were located in rural or semirural areas in central and western North Carolina. To make data collection manageable and to generate results that are more easily comparable to similar studies, focus groups were conducted with fourth-grade students only.

After obtaining parental permission, researchers spoke to two groups of fourth graders at each of the three participating schools, one comprised of students who had participated in their local public library's summer reading program the previous summer and one made up of students who had not. Researchers spoke with all students who returned permission slips from their parents. Researchers asked a series of predetermined questions to each group of students, video recording each of the thirty-to-forty-five-minute conversations. Researchers then transcribed the conversations, grouped the participant interviews and nonparticipant interviews into two separate data sets, and individually coded the transcriptions, using an inductive approach to identify emerging themes. The researchers then met to compare and agree on themes and codes before completing a second round of coding. After the second round of coding, researchers met again to compare results and resolve any differences that appeared in the coding.

Findings and Implications

Our results suggest that students who self-identified as readers were slightly more likely to participate in SRPs than those who did not. When asked about summer leisure activities, three participants mentioned reading while twelve nonparticipants mentioned reading (37.5 percent and 46 percent of the samples, respectively), but it is important to note that the majority of students in both groups reported engaging in regular reading throughout the summer.

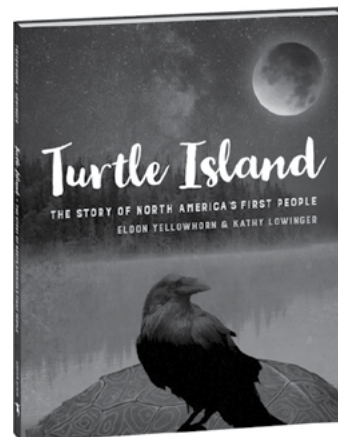
Those who participated in SRP cited parental influence and boredom as their primary motivations. Prizes, reading enjoyment, and ability to freely choose from a wide variety of books were mentioned as the things they valued most in the program. This group pointed to learning new things (50 percent) and receiving prizes (25 percent) as factors that motivated them to read.

Those students who did not participate in their public library's summer reading program cited being too busy doing other summer activities and being unaware of the program as the top reasons that they had not participated. Additionally, several students seemed to view SRP as a remediation or intervention that they did not need because they were already frequent and/or strong readers. In the words of one student, "I don't have to have something to get me in the habit of reading. Because I like to read now. So I don't have to, you know, I do it every day. I've got the habit."—Of the nonparticipants, one-third mentioned prizes or treats and books they enjoy as motivations that might encourage them to read more. Other motivational factors students mentioned included interesting books, new books in popular series, access to a good place to read, and the inclination to learn new things and "get smarter."

Access to Appealing Material

One of the most significant results of this study concerns the importance of free choice of a range of appealing material. SRP participants mentioned this

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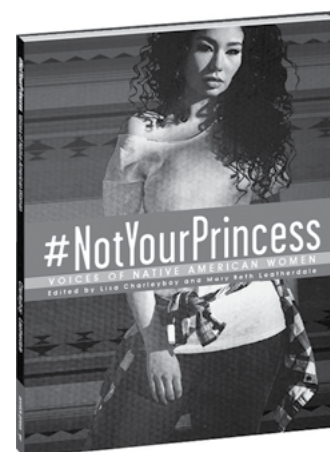


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as one of the main reasons they participated in the program, and nonparticipants cited it as a potential motivating factor to encourage their reading.

Not all reading material is created equal in the eyes of students, and the ability to select their own books is critical. Children in the participant group talked at length about the difference between “books [you] read because [you] have to read them” and “books [you] really want to read.” Some books, one participant exclaimed, you “just want to throw in the trash can.”

When asked what they liked most about SRP, one student remarked, “What I really liked about it was that I get to read the books I really want for free from the library,” and another noted “that you could pick your own little book that you wanted to read and stuff. That was interesting and was different. They had more interesting books.”

As for the nonparticipant population, many of them mentioned books they enjoy and new books in popular series as factors that motivate them to read, yet most seemed unaware that this type of material could be obtained for free at their local public libraries. There are exceptions to this, however; two of the nonparticipants in SRP did mention that they had visited the library in the summer for reading material because there were “no books to read at home.”

Taken together, these responses suggest that libraries should continue to collect a diverse array of popular literature for young readers, and they should continue to train staff in readers’ advisory so that patrons who walk in the door will walk out with titles they are likely to truly enjoy. Further, it is important to think about actively marketing and promoting collections and helpful staff, in this way focusing on relevant intrinsic motivators that may increase participation in summer reading and help children find joy and pleasure in leisure reading.

Parental Involvement

Parental involvement was brought up by both the participants and nonparticipants, with several participants indicating that their parents or grandparents had them sign up for SRP and a couple of nonparticipants revealing that their parents would not take them to the library. Half of the participant group revealed that they took part in SRP because a parent or other adult had signed them up for the program. In the words of one participant, her mother had signed her up over her protests; “She just signed me up anyway. She signs me up for everything.”

In contrast, one nonparticipant mentioned that his parents both worked long hours and so were unavailable to take him to the library, for example, and another remarked that his family didn’t typically engage in many activities during the summer, preferring to “stick around the house.”

Another student mentioned he didn’t participate because “I was at my Dad’s house and I didn’t think he would let me do it.”

These comments suggest that at this age, parental priorities heavily influence the types of activities they engage in and how they spend their leisure time. While much of SRP advertising tends to be aimed squarely at children to get them interested, these findings suggest that libraries should strive to communicate with parents as well. They should be made aware of the existence of the SRP program and the benefits it might offer their children so that they might be more likely to encourage participation and provide necessary transportation.

Prizes and Rewards

Finally, both participants and nonparticipants mention receiving tangible rewards as a factor that might motivate them to read, suggesting that this cornerstone of most SRPs need not be entirely jettisoned. The children in the nonparticipant group obviously did not take part in a program that would have provided them with prizes for reading; nevertheless, they mentioned toys, ice cream, money, trophies, and books when asked what motivates them to read.

Several participants noted the fun of the program’s rewards. One seemed to enjoy being rewarded for behavior she would have engaged in anyway, noting, “I like reading, so I liked how we got prizes if we read a certain amount of books.” Another student, however, seemed to be motivated to read by the possibility of earning prizes; “I like the part that you read and that you get a prize. I’m not that much of a reader. But if you read and get a prize then you want to read.”

Although research suggests that focusing on prizes as a motivational strategy can have negative repercussions, studies also show that small prizes, particularly literacy-related items, can be effective, often helping students to move from extrinsic motivation to intrinsic motivation as they discover the inherent pleasure of reading.²¹ Thus, scarce library resources might be better spent on small, literacy-related rewards in addition to beefing up collections, training staff, and educating parents about the academic benefits of summer reading than on purchasing substantial prizes for children who participate in the program.

Perceptions of the Library

Although many of the students we spoke to assumed the library did not have the current popular titles and series they were interested in reading, the group as a whole seemed to have positive associations with their local public libraries. Several SRP participants described their trips to the library as fun and agreed when one participant remarked that visits were so pleasant because “they were really nice” there.

In addition, some of the students who had not participated had still visited the library in the summer and expressed their appreciation for it. For example, one of these students said, “I really like it. They have this skeleton body set up. It’s like a

puzzle and you put the body parts together and make him look like a real body." Another explained, "I went so I could read. I like the quiet in the library."

Whether they participated in SRP or not, the students seemed to perceive the library as a welcoming place where they could both have fun and find a bit of quiet when they needed it. Libraries might consider building on these positive associations by encouraging students to visit libraries, attend programs, and interact with staff instead of or in addition to logging their reading to earn prizes.

Limitations and Further Study

In total, the researchers traveled to three North Carolina public schools and spoke to thirty-four students, eight of whom had participated in summer reading programs at their local libraries and twenty-six of whom had not. The small numbers, particularly of students who had participated in public library summer reading programs, is the primary limitation of this study. It is not clear whether there was an extremely low number of students in these fourth-grade classes who had participated in summer reading programs or whether most of those who participated simply decided not to take part in the focus group conversations.

Whatever the case, our picture of nonparticipants is richer than our picture of SRP participants, and thus much of our analysis focuses on this particular group, which is underrepresented in the literature, in part because of the logistical and administrative hurdles researchers encounter when trying to focus on children who did not participate in SRP. Further studies should involve not only a larger population, but include children of other ages from a larger geographic area as well, as this study was restricted to fourth-grade students in North Carolina.

Additionally, the researchers spoke to the students in a focus group format, which successfully generated conversation and allowed the students to build on what others were saying. However, there is the chance with this type of social interaction that participants might make remarks designed to impress or challenge other participants or that they might feel too inhibited to provide honest responses. Thus, individual interviews might be a helpful addition to this research.

Using a review of the professional literature and data collected from a series of focus groups, this study provides librarians a glimpse into some motivating factors and barriers regarding participation in summer reading programs. These programs can be a powerful tool for equalizing academic and literacy achievement across diverse populations and socioeconomic lines if we can successfully broaden their reach.

To accomplish this may require rethinking incentive structures and prizes, a push to educate parents about the importance of summer reading, and possibly increased marketing of not only summer reading programs and experiences the library offers,

but also its current, popular collections for recreational reading and expert, helpful staff ready to help connect kids with the books they will love. ☺

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This fall, literary fans will be able to stamp their letters with the delightful art from the groundbreaking and Caldecott-winning *The Snowy Day* by Ezra Jack Keats, published in 1962.

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