
The Effects of Free Choice on Student Learning: A Study of Summer Reading

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This study examines the reading behaviors and attitudes of adolescents during the summer when they can exercise free choice. Does mandated reading during summer non-school months as it is currently practiced encourage students to read, or does it create barriers to reading? It takes place in a United States high school, grades 9-12. A stratified random sample of 288 students and 11 teachers ensured representation of students from each of three ability groupings. Data were collected through student surveys and teacher interviews. Findings show that students attributed varied types of cognitive, psychological, and social learning to their summer reading. Mixed responses from teachers point to the need for consensus about the purpose of a summer reading program.

The Context for the Study

Structured, mandated summer reading is a traditional practice in both public and private schools throughout the United States, but it is not commonly practiced in other countries. The origins of the expectation that high school students will read at least three books from an approved list during the summer vacation months of July and August is not known. It is safe to assume that in part the rationale was to offer college-bound students the opportunity to reach beyond the standard curriculum to read the “right” books, that is, the classics, thereby increasing their chances of acceptance to the universities and colleges of their choice. Summer reading became the pathway to great literature as 15-year-olds embraced the works of Jane Austen and Ernest Hemingway. The practice as it has existed for decades has filtered down to the middle grades with more emphasis on young-adult titles. A summer reading program in a school in Beverly Hills, California looks much like its east-coast counterpart in Brooklyn, New York. The value of this cultural phenomenon has seemed self-evident, and educators do not generally question the pedagogy embedded in the practice. This study asked: Does mandated reading during summer non-school months as it is currently practiced encourage students to read, or does it create barriers to reading?

What do a typical US summer reading programs look like? Traditionally, summer reading in US high schools consists of static, grade-specific lists of book titles and a required written assessment. The teacher-librarian usually composes annotated lists of book titles, sometimes in coordination with the English teachers. In a

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survey of summer reading lists from 57 high schools in Connecticut, Williams (2002) found that although about one third of titles were published from 1990 to 2000, young-adult titles comprised only 18% of all list titles despite studies on student reading interests showing that adolescents consistently choose young-adult or contemporary-adult novels over traditional titles. Most of the titles in the analyzed lists were organized by grade level. Among the 57 lists studied, two did not list titles, merely giving a reading assignment; the remaining 55 contained anywhere from three to 300 titles, usually organized by grade level. Annotations appear on 27 lists, mostly one-liners or short summaries. Only authors and titles appear on 22 lists, and four lists cite titles only.

Summer reading lists in US high schools commonly do not even reflect student input for title choices and contain mostly fiction titles, especially classics. This is a common school practice that disenfranchises boys as readers as their preference is usually for nonfiction. Williams (2002) “also found that the literary canon in high school is not broadening to include nonwhite cultures in the current multicultural world” (p. 2). She found that the number of listed titles by “dead white males” was just short of double the number of titles by nonwhite authors alive or dead.

Despite the visual culture embraced by Generation Y students, many reading lists do not contain colorful graphics. Only two school districts in Williams’ (2002) survey thought outside the box by not providing lists at all: students could decide what they wanted to read. Summer reading programs do not take account of reading in multiple formats and electronic environments, nor do they go beyond the traditional expectation that students will read only books, excluding reading materials such as magazines, newspapers, and comic books.

In a typical scenario, the teacher-librarian purchases titles to support the reading lists and offers motivation activities such as book talks before summer vacation. Because the focus of summer reading is also on writing and assessment, the design of summer reading programs in US schools is heavily influenced by English teachers who require each student to read three books from their designated grade-level reading list. They also require that students submit written reports or take quick reading tests.

Before this study, summer reading lists at Barnstable High School (BHS), in Hyannis, Massachusetts fitted Williams’ (2002) profile and what is commonly observed in US schools. The grade-level lists emphasized the classics and were supplemented by some young-adult titles. Most, if not all, titles were fiction. A something-for-everyone approach characterized the lists, but only a token effort was made to differentiate for reading levels and interests. Nor was there any accommodation for free choice, as each of the lists contained about 20 titles. Despite the written requirements for books read, teachers did not believe that the assigned projects ensured that students were really reading the books. In fact many students did not submit projects. Some teachers were unhappy with starting the new school year with a graded requirement, but most English teachers expressed a strong bias for written reports and required projects. Teachers grade the projects, which become part of the grade for the first of three marking periods in an 18-week semester. Institutionalizing the projects by grading them was intended as an incentive for students to read and write, or at least a way to make them accountable for summer reading. Despite this

structure, English teachers were not convinced that the projects motivated students to read from the summer list, but were not willing to rescind the requirement because they wished to retain the grading practice.

Members of the English Department held divergent conceptions of the purpose of summer reading. Some believed that summer reading should be rigorous and academic, building on the curriculum and holding students accountable for their reading. Others saw it as an opportunity to motivate students to read by encouraging them to read for enjoyment after a school year filled with mandated reading.

How did summer reading practices change at Barnstable High School with regard to this study? The Chair of the English Department formed a Summer Reading Committee comprising the teacher-librarian and five English teachers to revise the summer reading lists. The committee decided to shift their thinking to conceptualizing a summer reading program and agreed on the following research-based guidelines to define the purpose of summer reading:

1. Choice is an important element in reading engagement (Schraw, Flowerday, & Reisetter, 1998).
2. Students' projects accommodate multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993) and thinking styles (Sternberg, 1997) by offering students options to writing.
3. Research "results suggest that schools can encourage children to read more by also requiring them to complete a short writing activity based on their summer reading activities" and that students who fulfilled teacher requirements by writing about their summer book "are predicted to read more books than their classmates who did not complete these activities (Kim, 2004, p. 185).
4. Reading responses that reflect activities that students enjoy in their leisure time are grounded in the aesthetic stance of transactional theory (Rosenblatt, 1978).
5. The purpose of summer reading is reading for fun—rather than for academic purposes—to encourage student to read more.

This evidence-based practice approach guided the decision to place the summer reading program online. Virtually all Net-generation students were using computers by the time they were 16-18 years of age. Among children aged 8-18, 96% have gone online. Seventy-four percent have access at home, and 61% use the Internet on a typical day (Jones, 2002). Because the Net generation is not only attracted to image-rich environments, but is more comfortable with them, the committee decided that the summer reading lists would contain colorful graphics. Reading lists mimic commercial Web pages such as amazon.com, with an annotated featured title and book-cover image. A link to *NoveList* (a database that contains recommended titles of novels for young adults with annotations, book covers, and related subject headings) directs students to find "more books like this one." *Get Books* links to the school library catalogs and a regional public library collaborative network. *Links to Borders* and Barnes & Noble offer students opportunities to purchase books.

The result was a dramatic change in the summer reading lists. A thousand books were presented in 12 annotated lists. Fiction comprised 82% of the total titles, falling within the range of what is typical. An analysis of fiction titles (Figure 1) shows that young-adult books and adult best-sellers, as indicated by the *New York Times* best-sellers lists, each comprised about one third of the total titles on the reading lists. This balance can be said to be a result of student input gathered through a survey

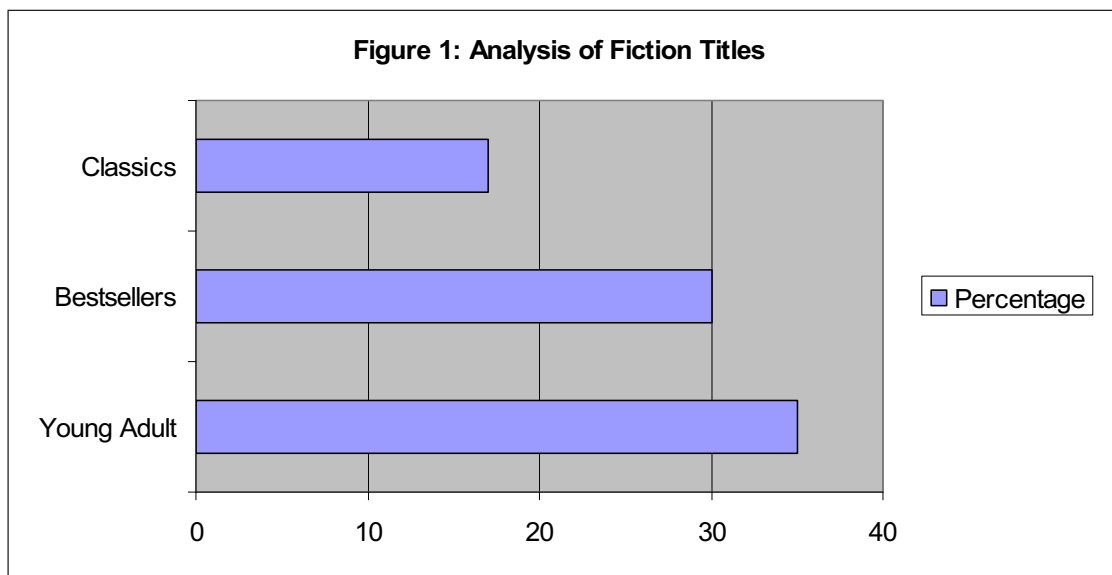



Figure 1. Analysis of fiction titles.

that heavily favored adult best-sellers. Staff also had input into the title selections through recommendations. The teacher-librarian chose the young-adult titles using standard selection tools and students' requests from the survey. Classics made up only 17% of the total titles, a drastic decline from what is typically found in US summer reading lists.

An analysis of adult and young-adult titles shows that adult books (best-sellers and classics) comprised almost half of all the titles (47%), and young-adult titles accounted for about one third (35%).

The result of the committee's work is a summer reading Web site that is available at <http://www.barnstable.k12.ma.us/bhs/Library/SummerReadingProgram.htm>. (Because this is a working Web site, some changes to the original site are not noted here.) When designing the site, the teacher-librarian surveyed the Internet to find out what other Web-based summer reading lists looked like. She could find none. Content and design decisions were research-based as determined by the committee and constituted a new way of presenting summer reading. This is not to say that it is the only way that a Web-based program can look. Some of the 12 book lists are genre-centered, but modified for broader appeal; for example, science fiction includes time travel and fantasy. *Take the Fast Lane: Quick Reads* includes mostly young-adult titles. *Sprint to Campus: Books for the College-Bound* contains modern as well as traditional classics. *Run With a Winner: Best Sellers* includes titles recommended by students in the survey administered by the school librarian. *Visit Someone Else's World* includes books about strong adolescent protagonists who overcome extraordinary challenges and includes multicultural themes. *Traveling Together: Relationships* includes stories about friendships, romance, and family. *Sailing Through Stormy Days: Books That Make You Laugh* addresses teachers' concerns about the gravity of English curriculum readings. *Tour the Real World: Non-Fiction* addresses boys' reading preferences and *Student and Staff Pix* reflects recommended titles tagged with this icon. 

Students could choose among 40 Reading Responses. Some of these responses offer alternatives that invite students to choose activities that mimic their leisure-time activities. One example follows.

Work with a friend through phone, e-mail, blog, social networking site, to "Write an epilogue and/or prologue to the book, describing events that could have taken place before and after the plot of the book."

In addition, students can choose alternatives such as reading the books listed on the Web sites of colleges they are considering, joining summer reading programs at universities, or blogging.

Central Concepts: Summer Effect and Effective Summer Reading Practices

Summer Effect

The summer effect on student achievement is well researched. "The long 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). Research findings have consistently reported that (a) student learning declines or remains the same during the summer months; and (b) the magnitude of the change differs by socioeconomic status (Malach & Rutter, 2003).

A meta-analysis of 39 studies (Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsay, & Greathouse, 1996) examined the effects of summer vacation on standardized test scores. Findings indicated that summer learning loss equaled at least one month of instruction as measured by grade level equivalents on standardized test scores. Family income emerged as the best predictor of loss in reading comprehension and word recognition. On some measures, many children from middle-class and affluent families showed gains in reading achievement over the summer, but students at all income levels showed lower reading comprehension scores. Disadvantaged children showed the greatest losses, with a loss of three months of grade-level equivalence during the summer months each year, compared with an average of a one-month loss by middle-income children when reading and math performance are combined.

Alexander and Entwisle (1996) reported that the achievement gap between rich and poor children as measured by test scores increased throughout the elementary years. The difference between high- and low-income children's reading scores on the California Achievement Test, as a percentage of the standard deviation of scores, rose from 68% in grade 1 to 98% in grade 3 and to 114% in grade 8. The "faucet theory" (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 2000) suggests that opportunities to learn and access educational resources are turned on during the school year for all students. As a result, learning gains made during the school year are remarkably similar for students from diverse social and economic backgrounds (Entwisle, Alexander, & Olson, 1997; Heyns, 1978; Murnane, 1975). However, when school is not in session during the summer and the faucet is turned off, inequalities arise in educational opportunities and outcomes (Alexander et al., 2001; Cooper et al., 1996). Children with special educational needs (Sargent & Fidler, 1987) or those who speak a language other than

English at home may experience a greater negative effect from an extended period without practice.

Effective Summer Reading Practices

Heyns (1978) studied the effects of summer reading for grades 6 and 7 for two years and concluded:

1. The number of books read in summer is consistently related to academic gains.
2. The major factors determining whether a child reads over the summer were: whether the child used the public library; the child's sex (girls read more than boys); socioeconomic status; and the distance from home to a library.
3. "More than any other public institution, including the schools, the public library contributed to the intellectual growth of children during the summer. Moreover, unlike summer school programs, the library was used by over half the children and attracted children from diverse backgrounds" (p. 77).

Reading research that studies the effects of free voluntary reading (FVR) informs this study, because summer reading is a type of FVR called extensive reading whereby students read independently and there is minimal accountability. Table 1 shows research findings that compare results from reading comprehension test scores of students who participated in in-school free reading with scores of students who participated in traditional approaches, that is, direct instruction and assigned reading.

These results are categorized as those free reading programs that had a positive effect, a negative effect, or no effect. "Two findings clearly emerge from these data: Firstly, in-school free reading programs are consistently effective. In 51 of 54 comparisons (94 percent), readers do as well as or better than students who were engaged in traditional programs" (Krashen, 2004, p. 2). In cases of no difference, free reading emerges as just as good as traditional instruction, which confirms that free reading results in literacy growth. Second, studies that last longer show more positive results (Krashen).

Other benefits of FVR address aliteracy, or the lack of motivation to read. The work of Csikszentmihalyi (1991) defines flow as the state of deep but effortless involvement in an activity. Reading "is currently perhaps the most often mentioned flow activity in the world" (p. 117), indicating that FVR is enjoyable. Finally, studies support the finding that those who read more know more (Filback & Krashen, 2002; Ravitch & Finn, 1987; West & Stanovich, 1991).

Table 1
Results of Reading Comprehension Tests: In-School Free Reading
Compared With Traditional Approaches

<i>Duration</i>	<i>Positive</i>	<i>No Difference</i>	<i>Negative</i>
Less than 7 months	8	14	3
7 months-1 year	9	10	0
Greater than 1 year	8	2	0

Krashen (2004, p. 2), reprinted by permission of Stephen Krashen.

The Study

Background of the Site

This study examined the effects of free-choice summer (July and August in the US) reading programs on adolescents' reading behaviors and attitudes. What can we learn about students' reading when they are given free choices? Who benefits?

The site for the study was Barnstable High School (BHS) located in Barnstable on Cape Cod, Massachusetts in the northeast US. The median household income of the town is \$46,811, higher than the national median of \$41,994 (US Census Bureau, 2000). Hyannis is one of seven villages in the town of Barnstable. A village is a geographical designation that also serves to identify school districts: each village has one elementary school with the exception of Hyannis, which has two. Two middle schools and one high school serve the seven villages. All schools are administered from the central education department of the town located in Hyannis. The population of Hyannis is 20,097, about half the total population of the town of Barnstable. Hyannis is the most ethnically diverse community on Cape Cod, with non-whites comprising 39% cent of the population. It is the commercial and transportation center of the town of Barnstable and was designated an urban area by the 2000 US Census. Like the other villages of the town, Hyannis has a public library located on a downtown main street. The public libraries support the summer reading programs of the schools in their villages by making the schools' reading lists available to their patrons. Beyond this there is little communication or coordination between public and school libraries.

BHS is the largest high school on the Cape, serving almost 1,900 students in grades 9-12. The school population is 92% white. The largest minorities include African-Americans (almost 3%) and Hispanic/Latinos (almost 2%). The school's mission statement encourages "traditional and innovative methods to engage the different learning styles of our students. We will prepare graduates to take responsibility for their own learning" (*Barnstable High School Program of Studies*, 2004, p. 3). The school is administered by a principal, an assistant principal, and five housemasters who oversee the daily operations of five self-contained houses or mini-schools. Students from grade 9 (14 years old) through grade 12 (17 years old) are placed in three ability groupings. College Prep 1 (CP1) are low achievers who tend to be reluctant readers with low reading and standardized test scores; CP2 are average achievers; and Honors students. The BHS library strives to be an integral part of teaching and learning through strong collaboration between the school librarian and classroom teachers.

Methodology

The stratified random sample consisted of 288 students from the three ability groups and 11 English teachers. We surveyed students and interviewed teachers. Closed-ended questions gathered information such as age, sex, and class level. Half the questions were open-ended to encourage students' direct and honest responses about their reading behaviors and attitudes. Survey items focused on respondents' book selection behaviors, reading achievements, attitudes toward this new reading program, and the number of books they read. A total of 550 questionnaires were distributed to the three strata: CP1, CP2, and Honors students. From each stratum a

random sample of students was then selected. Two hundred, eighty-eight questionnaires were returned for a return rate of 52%. Five questionnaires were not usable, resulting in 283 valid questionnaires. Eleven interviews with English teachers explored their views about summer reading and their perceptions of the effectiveness of this new summer reading program. Each interview lasted 20-30 minutes and was tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Findings and Discussion

Profile of Survey Participants

Of 283 participants, 53% were male and 47% were female. CP1 students comprised 15%; 47% were CP2 students; 38% were Honors students. This corresponds to the ratio of the school population: grade 9 comprises 29%, grade 10 37%, grade 11 21%, and grade 12 13%.

Summer Reading Participation

Ten percent of students reported that they did not participate in the program. In total, 14% of the boys and 4% of the girls did not participate (Figures 2 and 3). Of the 27 students who reported non-participation, 78% were male and 22% were female. CP1s accounted for 52%, 48% were CP2s, and none was Honors. Nonparticipants by grade level were six from grade 9, eight from grade 10, 8 from grade 11, and five from grade 12.

Analysis showed that CP1 students had the highest non-participating rate. One third of CP1 respondents (14 of 42) did not participate, whereas only 10% of the CP2 respondents (13 of 134) and none of the Honors students did not participate (Figure 4).

The reasons for students' non-participation were unclear. Most said that they just did not like reading or did not comment at all; two (0.6%) said that they did not have

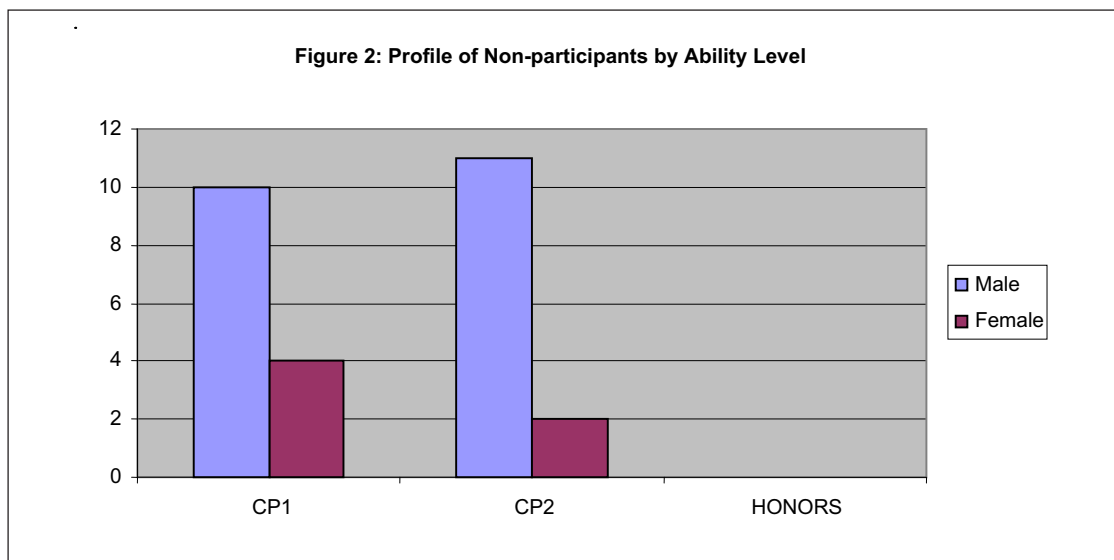


Figure 2. Profile of non-participants by ability level.

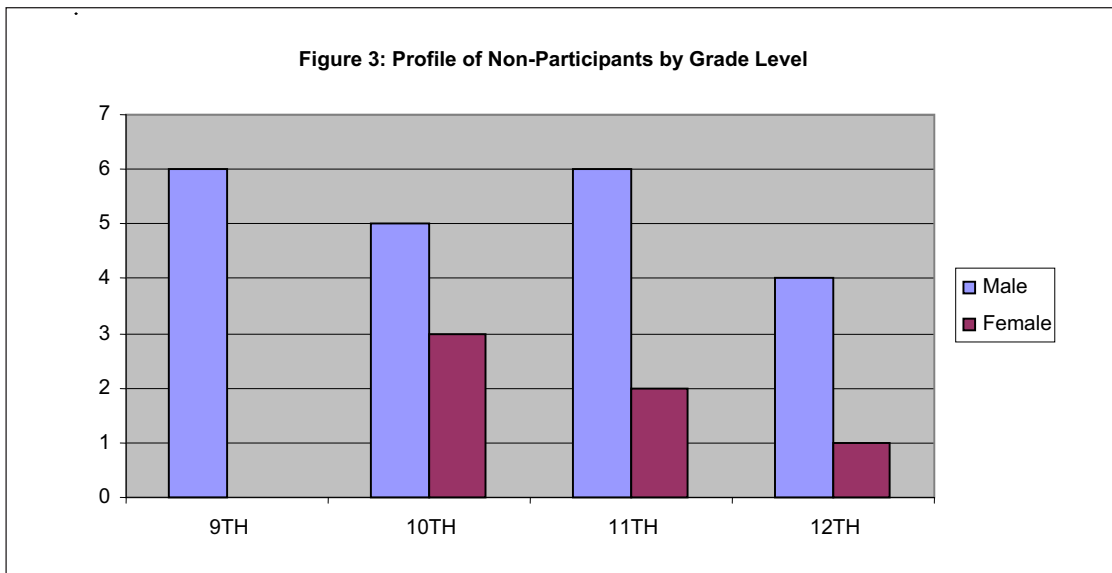


Figure 3. Profile of non-participants by grade level.

computer and Internet access. Access (or no access) to a computer and the Internet was not perceived as a major barrier to this new Web-based reading program. Of the 25 respondents who reported that they did not have computer access at home, only two did not participate in the reading program because of this, but the rest did. Computer access does not seem to explain why students decided not to participate. It is evident that most students who reported no access at home managed to participate through other means such as going to the public library. In addition, trends

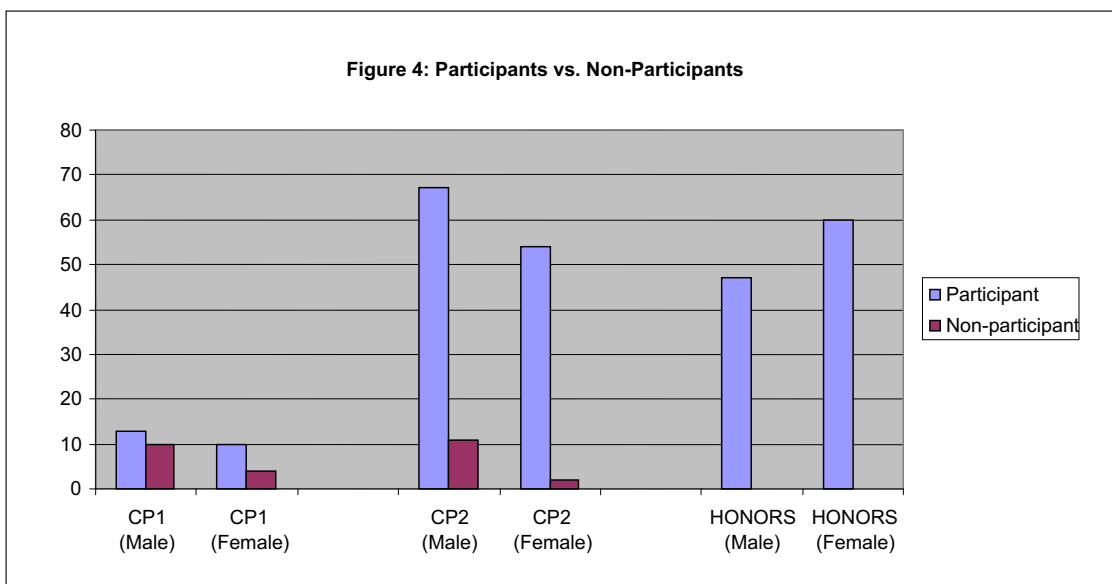


Figure 4. Analysis of participants and non-participants.

emerging from the data indicate that male students have a higher non-participating rate than girls (21 to 6). This is consistent with studies that acknowledge the significance of gender in reading activities. Third, ability level (i.e., CP1, CP2, and Honors) rather than grade level seems to be a better indicator of students' reading behavior: the higher the ability level, the greater the participation. This can be explained in part by students' individual preferences and career goals. Students who read better are usually avid readers and by nature are more willing and motivated to participate in a reading activity. Students who read better tend to be college-bound and more willing to spend time on reading activities.

Number of Books Read

Students reported reading a total of 922 books in summer, with a mean of 3.26 books per student. Gender and reading level differences emerge again. On average, girls read more books than did boys (3.79 to 2.77 books). CP1s read the least, with an average of 1.2 books per student compared with 3.1 books for CP2s and 4.2 books for Honors students. Grade level is not significant in terms of the number of books read. The ratio across the four grades is 3.85 to 3.27 to 3.3 to 4.47 books. The higher rate in grade 12 is explained by exceptions: three grade 12 students reported reading a comparatively large number of books: 10, 20, and 22 respectively, increasing the mean for grade 12. Excluding these three students brings the mean down to 3.13 books per student, which is similar to the other grades. On average, girls continued to read more than boys throughout the four grades (Figure 5).

Book Lists

Regarding the multiple, non-grade-specific reading lists, almost half (46%) reported having adequate choices. Thirteen percent thought that there were too many choices, whereas 24% thought that there were not enough, and 17% did not answer this question. On average, students appreciated the variety of books because "Different

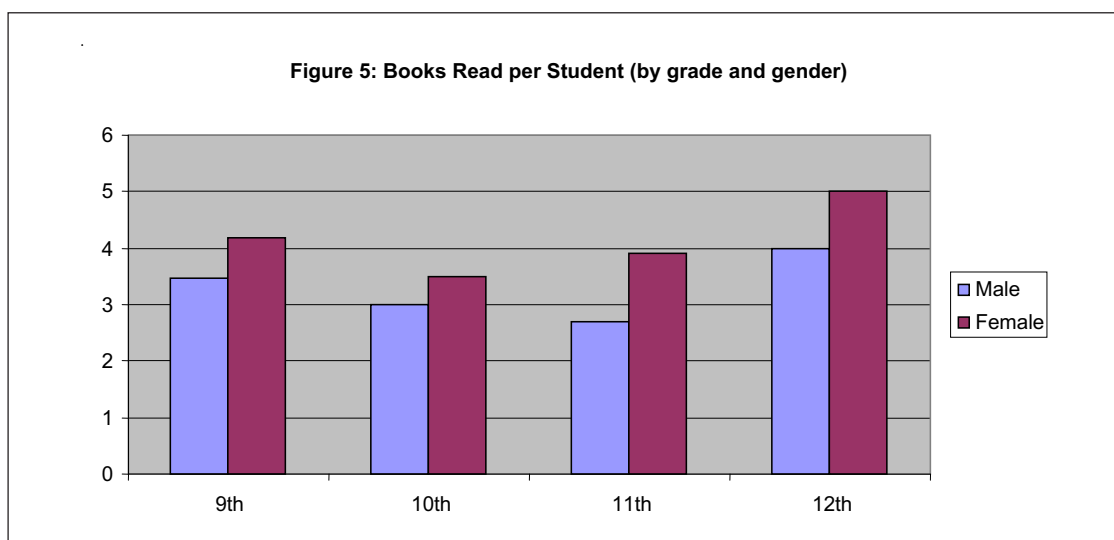


Figure 5. Books read per student (by grade and gender).

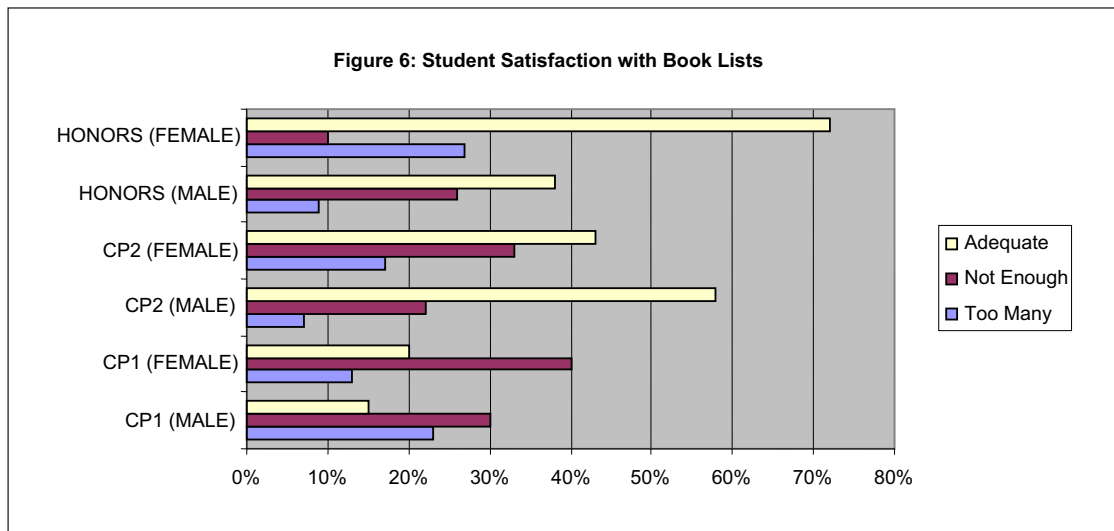


Figure 6. Student satisfaction with book lists.

people like different books.” Students who requested more choices preferred more specific categories such as boy/girl books or sports books. Students who wanted fewer choices commented that too many choices confused them and that, “it was hard to choose [from such an amount of books] and find [the book].” More girls than boys gave positive feedback: adequate choices 53% to 46%.

Honors and CP2 students in general were positive about the book list choices. Nearly half the Honors students and half the CP2 students reported that the book list choices were adequate. However, only 18% of the CP1s agreed. They seemed to be particularly unhappy with these lists. More than one third reported that there were not enough book choices, and 18% reported that there were too many (Figure 6). This indicates that the book lists did not meet the reading interests of the CP1 students. For CP1s who said that there were not enough choices, most chose books outside the existing book lists whereas the rest did not mention extra effort. Those who said that there were too many book choices stated that it was too hard for them to choose and to find books.

When asked how they liked the non-grade-specific lists, 66% expressed satisfaction. A similar pattern appeared across all three levels: 50% of CP1 students, 60% of CP2 students, and 68% of Honors students. Satisfaction rates from girls (62%) and boys (57%) did not show a significant difference. Four percent of students indicated that they preferred grade-specific lists; 6% did not care whether the list was grade-specific; 25% did not answer this question, and 5% gave unclear or invalid answers. No CP1 students preferred the grade-specific lists, and only 3% of CP2 students and 6% of Honors students preferred the traditional grade-specific lists.

Access to the online reading lists depended on Internet access. Print lists were available in the school library and in town bookstores. Students could access the Internet throughout the summer in their village public libraries. Thirteen percent of students did not answer the question about access to computers during the summer;

79% reported access. Nine percent (2 CP1, 14 CP2, and 7 Honors students) reported that access to the Internet was a problem because they “needed a ride to the public library [to use the Internet]” and they preferred “a print version of the lists.” No significant gender difference was found.

Book Selection Behaviors

Respondents reported reading a total of 922 books in the past summer. They reported 630 titles used for reading projects. Thirty-two of the titles were not included in the analysis because of illegible handwriting, incomplete or incorrect titles, or respondents’ inability to recall titles. Five hundred, ninety-eight books were then classified into three categories: realistic and historical fiction (70%), fantasy and science fiction (16%), and nonfiction (12%). The significant differences between realistic/historical fiction and the other two categories may be explained partly by students’ reading preferences or by lists themselves, which contain more realistic/historical fiction. Among the 12 book lists only one was devoted to nonfiction and another to fantasy/science fiction. The books they had read but not used for projects (290 books) may also affect the findings if students chose other types of books for non-project reading.

We note some interesting findings here. Nonfiction books appear to be more appealing to male students. Nearly two thirds of the nonfiction titles reported were reported by boys. On average, 13% of girls and 25% of boys reported reading at least one nonfiction book. Second, reading ability again seems to be an influential factor. Whereas only one CP1 (male) student, or 4%, reported reading one nonfiction title, 22% (27 of 121) of CP2 students and 33% (35 of 107) of Honors students did so. CP2 and Honors students apparently read more nonfiction books. It is possible that CP1 students have difficulty reading nonfiction books because they are labeled as low-achieving and encountered difficulty on standardized tests, which contain short, out-of-context, and information-loaded passages. It is also possible that CP1 students prefer fiction for other reasons. Fiction may better meet their reading needs and interests. Fiction has identifiable characters and well-structured development of events, and it is likely that class readings and remedial instruction in class focus on fiction. Nonfiction may be perceived as boring to students with poor vocabulary and word recognition.

Students reported the two most important factors affecting book selection as “self reading interest” and “recommendation by friend/family/teacher.” No gender difference was found, but reading level emerged as a factor. Whereas “self reading interest” was the top concern for most CP2 and Honors students, CP1 students mostly preferred “recommendation by friend/family/teacher,” followed by “self reading interest.” The three book lists students used most to browse were *Run with a Winner: Best Sellers* (which includes titles recommended by students and staff), *Take the Fast Lane: Quick Reads* (which includes mostly young-adult titles), and *Student and Staff Pix* (which includes books recommended by students and staff). College-bound and classics readings were not among their top choices. No significant gender difference was found except for rank order: most boys’ top choice was Quick Reads; the top choice of girls was Best Sellers. No difference was found across CP1, CP2, and Honors.

Obtaining Books

Students browsed the lists, but only 9% used the “Get Books” feature to seek and locate the book. (A similar pattern emerged across the three levels: 11% of CP1, 8% of CP2, and 9% of Honors students.) The top three methods for obtaining books were purchasing them from a local bookstore (40%), borrowing them from a public library (38%), or having them already at home (36%). Fifteen percent of the respondents borrowed books from the school library, 13% from a friend or relative, and 7% purchased books online. No obvious gender or grade-level differences were found.

The BHS Library did provide multiple copies for many titles, but public libraries and friends seemed to be more convenient providers of books. (The school library is not open during the summer.) Students who borrowed books from the school library preferred browsing the bookshelves and talking to the librarian. Using the online catalog was not among their top choices. They may not have known how to use the catalog, or they may have preferred that someone else find the books for them (as in a local bookstore or the public library). Only 18 students purchased online, probably because most high school students do not have access to credit cards. Their preference for browsing may be another factor that boosted their use of a local store over a virtual one. Finally, it was evident that students’ selection of books was shaped by existing available books when they chose to read books that they already owned.

Reading Activities

Another important feature of this reading program is the provision of over 40 project choices that contain a variety of language- and art-based activities. Although students generally liked the book choices, the satisfaction rate for the project choices (38%) was not as high as the dissatisfaction rate (28%). Eight percent gave mixed responses such as, “it was interesting, but some were boring” and “some were good, but some were really weird.” Twenty-two percent did not comment. Similar dissatisfaction rates show across the three levels, but the reasons for discontent vary. Whereas CP1 students complained about the number of project choices (“too many to choose”) and about the time they had to spend (“too time-consuming”), the complaints from CP2 and Honors students focused more on the projects themselves. “They are boring,” “they are way too easy,” and “they are no better than the traditional book reports.” Interestingly, no respondents, not even those who were unhappy with the “easy” projects, reported using the alternatives: reading books from the colleges they were considering, joining summer reading at other universities, or blogging. Revealed here is that distinct strategies may be necessary for diverse students in determining their project choices. CP1 students seemed to need more specific guidance and instructions about what the projects were and how to finish them step-by-step in time. CP2 and Honors students, however, may need assistance to be more discerning in their decision-making and to think about what is best for them.

Reading Achievements

On average, students agreed that giving them more choices enriched their reading experiences. More than half the students enjoyed the freedom to browse and select among a variety of book lists. They commented that this summer reading experience

was different and fun because of the variety of books and project choices and that they felt more enthusiastic about summer reading because they found the books they chose interesting. One student commented, "I couldn't put the book down ... the book was really exciting." Students also reported that they read more books than they had read the previous summer. Because of the variety of book choices, they were more likely to find what was of interest to them and so read more than before. Most encouraging perhaps is that students commented that they read and wrote with more confidence. Some supportive statements included: "I read faster" and "I read books with better vocabulary and writing composition than in past years." The most encouraging statement was made by a CP1 student who said, "I feel I can read anything now."

In addition, students reported a variety of rewarding achievements from this summer reading program, from technical components such as vocabulary and reading more books to content-wise components such as "the Civil War and humanity," "globalization," and "different cultures," to psychological and social components such as "gaining self-esteem," "dealing with friends that smoke and drink," "think stuff through before acting," "not to give up even when time is hard," "time management," and "be respectful." Books seemed to provide them with new insights into coping with challenges or gaining a better understanding of some issues.

Interestingly, most learning achievements were reported across the three levels with only one exception: "information" or "facts" were reported by CP2 and Honors students, but not by CP1 students. Among all the reading achievements mentioned by CP1 students, none was associated with information in the books. Rather, most identified learning life lessons from books as their major reading achievements. They seemed not to acknowledge the value of the information. Perhaps the books they chose tended to be less information-loaded but more inspirational. Perhaps they did not know how to extract information from books because of their limited reading ability; or perhaps they did not see this element as an achievement.

Responses From Teachers

Teachers had mixed responses about the benefits of the program. Generally, they agreed that students had seemed to read more this past summer given the number of reading projects they submitted. They found that completion rates of projects were better than in previous years. Several teachers believed that the variety of choices had contributed to this change. "Overall," Teacher A commented, "I think more kids read because there was a little more freedom ... I had a student read a whole author. They found something by him that they enjoyed, so they picked up something else by him. That aspect for me was triumphant." However, teachers also pointed out the possibilities of repetition and cheating: students might have read the books before and could do some projects like redesigning the book cover without reading the book. "I think one of the issues with having so many activities is there were some you could definitely tell had read the book, and there were some that you couldn't," Teacher J commented. Several teachers expressed the same concern: "Students can just go to a bookstore or a library to pull out a book, look at its book cover, and then redesign one." The projects students turned in might not be a valid indicator of their reading interests or the number of books they had read.

Teachers' concerns are not unfounded: comparatively higher project completion rate can be deceiving given the grading structure. The assessment of projects focused on completion rather than quality. Students who turned in three projects received 100 points; two projects yielded 70 points; and one project yielded 50 points. Some teachers complained that this was problematic. Teacher D commented,

That kind of grading [by the amount of projects turned in, but not by the quality of the projects] has been really disrespectful to the student because the student is upset—"I spent days on my three projects and I really want you to pay attention to it."... I've seen things that are spectacular, an A quality work, but I've also seen things that are embarrassing. It's been really hard for me to grade it appropriately. I don't think it's fair that you give one student full credit when that child has not worked as hard as the other person ... and I can see some students really did not do their work. They just found the easiest projects to do.

Would this program in the long run benefit more students than the traditional program? The responses were diverse. Some teachers were suspicious and insisted there be more guidelines. They believed that reading should be a learning-oriented matter and that students should be reading appropriate books in order to learn. The variety of choices provided by this Web-based reading program in their view could cause great confusion and did not really change students' reading behaviors or reading achievements. Some motivated readers did produce a few impressive projects. "They will probably just do well in any reading-related thing," Teacher D commented. On average, they did not see any drastic leap or drop. The program was to them simply "different." Honors students were still avid readers, CP1 students still did not read, and CP2 students still "just did the job."

However, some teachers believed that students should be given choices to read any materials that interested them. They did not mind that students read something they had read before because they might have new reactions on reading the same book a second time. They did not mind if students read books below their reading level, because "reading on one's own" builds confidence in developing reading skills. These teachers believed that the freedom that this new Web-based reading program gave the students would in the long run, if not immediately, encourage students, especially unmotivated students, to be more creative and independent in thinking and learning.

Implications for Further Study

Emerging from these findings is a snapshot of students' reading behaviors and their perceptions of the benefits or accomplishments associated with summer reading when they are given free choices. The findings point to more differentiation in summer reading to meet the diverse needs of students, particularly with regard to ability levels and gender. Among the most challenging findings is the program's weak effect on the reading attitudes and behaviors of low-achieving students, who are more likely be disadvantaged, to drop out of school, and to score poorly on state standardized tests.

A surprising finding is the low use of the technological aspects of the online resources. Students did not take advantage of the online catalogs for the school library collection or for the regional network of public libraries. Nor did they use virtual bookstores, preferring to visit local town stores. Nor did they take advantage of

blogging as a reading response. These elements that represented content unique to a digital environment and design that enabled interactivity were not used by “digital natives” who are accustomed to Web sites with these features. Students did, however, take advantage of browsing the lists in a digital environment that facilitated navigation. This raises a question for further study: How can the interactivity of a digital environment provide motivation, mentoring, and social interaction between teacher and student and among students and their peers as part of the design of a Web-based summer reading program?

The benefits or achievements of summer reading differed as perceived by students and teachers. Some teachers, based on students’ performance as expressed in the reading response projects, did not see students benefiting from this new summer reading program. The matter of purpose is a factor: divergent views of academic versus recreational reading. Traditional views of summer reading, including concerns about the quality of books read and the importance of grading and accountability, seem to emanate from deeply held convictions about learning and assessment that are rooted in schooling. Less traditional views embrace the reading research that targets motivation as key to reading. It is interesting to note that students identified life lessons and new insights into personal challenges through reading and that reading was fun. Their comments acknowledge that reading is more than an intellectual experience; it is a private and personal experience; and these personal benefits cannot be tested through standardized tests. Evaluation of these personal aspects can be difficult and subjective. Most of the time, teachers have access only to students’ reading outputs, for example, their submitted projects. These projects, however, do not reflect the latent effects of reading, that is, how individuals might benefit from reading in various ways. This points to the need to provide materials and structures that help students grow through their reading experiences, not only cognitively, but psychologically, emotionally, and socially.

This study has implications for further research to address 21st-century reading and learning. One of the most important international definitions of reading literacy comes from the *Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)* survey conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OCED, 2003). The PISA surveyed more than 265,000 students from 32 countries, and their results found that reading literacy is no longer considered as simply the ability to read and write. Today, “reading literacy is understanding, using, and reflecting on written texts, in order to achieve one’s goals, to develop one’s knowledge and potential, and to participate in society” (p. 108). In other words, this definition looks at how well students can use written materials to meet the challenges of the real world and to become lifelong learners. This definition also resonates with our findings about the reading behaviors of low-achieving students in dealing with life lessons through reading. As we develop a perspective on reading that goes beyond standardized tests, a new theoretical framework to encompass diverse reading competences appears to be needed. A better pedagogy should address the affective dimension of reading as well as reading for comprehension. How we reconcile reading to meet personal needs with institutionalized learning is the greatest challenge.

Our findings indicate that free choice enriches summer reading, which is an important component of school library services. Can there be consensus or compro-

mise about the purpose of summer reading? What is the role of the school librarian in negotiating a defined purpose? Should school libraries provide services through the summer months? How can school libraries collaborate with public libraries, which emerged from this study as a major source of books for summer reading? These questions should be more fully explored and evaluated. The strong rationale for summer reading and free choice must continue to drive rigorous research to develop multiple models of reading approaches that meet diverse student needs and are applicable to reading throughout the year. To this end, research-based reading practices, aided by technology, are critical to addressing questions raised by this study successfully. Findings about the importance of reading to the social, psychological, and emotion well-being of adolescents, as well as its academic benefits, invite further research to define clearly a research-based purpose for summer reading programs.

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