Abstract

Summer provides students with a much needed mental break, but the long summer months cause an achievement gap for students restarting school in the fall. Unfortunately, this gap falls primarily on students with low socioeconomic backgrounds because of lack of vacations, substantially less access to reading material and decreased parent involvement. Solutions to this problem does not take a total shift in the education system, but rather simple steps are explained in helping students maintain reading knowledge and comprehension.
"School's out for summer...school's out for-ever..."

These popular lyrics by Alice Cooper echo through school hallways as students, and possibly as teachers, prepare for summer vacation. In the early years of schooling the nine month calendar system was designed when 85% of Americans participated in the agriculture business; leaving time for children to help parents with harvest and planting schedules (Cooper, 2003). Since the 1900s, times have changed and only about 3 percent of families' livelihoods remain tied to farming life (Cooper, 2003). With such a long break between school years, problems frequently arise and often three concerns take place when looking at the academic calendar. Parents and teachers present the teaching community with many worries, but one concern stems from the idea that children learn best when continuous, in which the long summer break disrupts that instruction. Several problems arise when long summer breaks interrupt learning including significant loss of knowledge, and a noteworthy amount of review becomes needed when school resumes. Another concern presented towards the students with special educational needs includes children with disabilities and those who speak another language besides English. Finally, children who live in a family with a low socioeconomic status often suffer learning loss far greater than those whose parents are of a higher SES. Some believe the reason for this stems from the thought that children of higher SES take more vacations, have hands on experience in different environments, and interact with diverse people. While children may gain important life experiences during summer vacation, in reality they lose crucial instruction.

Little question surrounds the idea that summer provides a much-needed break for students, parents and teachers. For students, summer provides a much-needed mental breather.
Kids interact outdoors, take family vacations and explore their surroundings while getting healthy exercise. With a free schedule, many families take vacations and spend quality time together. Middle and high class families often take educational vacations to museums, summer camps, participate in swim lessons, go on trips, visit local zoos or parks, and play sports, to name a few. These activities provide children with much needed life experience, different from most classrooms at school. In fact, a study by Entwisle (2001) states, "summer school gain for students of all socioeconomic levels is quite small: about one-seventh of a standard deviation—roughly one month on average or a few test points (out of three or four hundred) on standardized tests" (p. 4). Many of these life experiences require students to practice their problem solving skills in real situations. Children with families privileged enough go on educational trips during summer still have show some learning loss but less than children left out of these summer activities.

Unfortunately, a summer without learning creates detrimental loss to students' knowledge; especially to those of low socioeconomic statuses. A research synthesis performed by Harris Cooper (2003) found that after an entire summer of relaxation, students returned with an equivalent of one months loss of instruction between the fall and spring. In a Baltimore school study that began in 1982, researchers selected twenty schools based on racial composition and socioeconomic status. The study found that regardless of the SES of students scores during the fall went up dramatically. However, after the summer break, students that are more affluent gained nine points in math and fifteen in reading while poor students dropped into the negatives. The study found that this pattern repeated over the years. Although the summer may be good for some students, many underprivileged students suffer. What does a difference in finances have to do with the student? To answer this puzzling question it benefits to think about the parents'
Summer Learning: Out of School Programs

attitudes toward school. Many or some middle and high-class parents see themselves as assistants in students learning; kind of like assistant coaches says researcher Entwisle (2001). She explains (2001) lower class parents often view school as a place to send their children to learn and see education as the school's job, not their own (p. 06). Because parents of a higher status often take a proactive role in student educations, they seem to know how school's work and therefore turn out more aware on how to help students continue to thrive during the summer months, explains Entwisle. Neighborhoods have much to do with the summer learning gains and losses. Does the community have a library available? How about a summer camp, reading program or community service projects for kids? Finances also determine what kinds of learning equipment a family purchases for the home. Middle class families may be able to splurge on books, games, and computers that help encourage summer learning. The financial factor has a major impact on the way a child will spend his or her summer vacation putting the poor into an increased chance for instruction loss.

Money contributes to a child's education and proves a major factor in learning, but expectations are much more. "Parents living with children in a high status position generally are expect their students to do well in school and parents make sure this happens," says Doris Entwisle (2001). In affluent families, if a low mark gets sent home on a report card, multilevel steps become implemented to improve the student's grades and this continues throughout the summer. Being such a major difference in viewpoints and lifestyles, a point to understand stems from the difference between high and low socioeconomic statuses, because this would may not be the case in a blue-collar family. Tragically, the message of a low mark to a poor parent tends to say that their child has already failed and nothing can be done to help. Entwisle (2001) describes in detail the idea that in some, not all cases, parents of a low income background take
the position of the parents being parents and teachers being teachers. They may not feel as though they are qualified or may even be intimidated by the school system. When this idea encapsulates the mindset of a parent, summer learning opportunities seem almost useless. Often during the summer months blue collar families often expect their children to "just be kids and have fun," which stems from the "it's the teacher's job to teach," mindset. Summer months do provide a break for children but for children of low SES and others that carry this mindset the summer months are damaging to a child's knowledge.

The summer learning gap proves detrimental to a child's schooling. This gap becomes embedded not in the classroom, but in the learning children do outside of school, including after-school hours, weekends, holidays, and summer breaks. Richard Allington (2008) explains that today's children gain a remarkable amount of knowledge through their daily reading of books, computers, and other materials on their own time. Many parents, friends and siblings have taken the pleasure in talking to a six year old about a cartoon, and they can tell you what happens from beginning to end. School for kids proves the same way, soaking up information like sponges. In an article by Donna Celano and Susan Neuman (2008) they point out many facts between high and low socioeconomic students; for every one line of print read by low-income children, middle-income read three (p. 257). One reason for this is due to book availability. For children in a poor neighborhood book availability is one for every 355 children (Allington, 2008, p. 21). Middle class neighborhoods fortunate enough to have twelve books for every one child is nowhere close to this number in lower class communities. When looking at the difference in scale it can baffle a person and explains many problems over summer for low socioeconomic class children. Parents, in order to help maintain the knowledge of their student, over break would have to provide many learning experiences and activities to facilitate knowledge. Reading, for
instance, needs scaffolding. Children should understand and comprehend what they read. An adult can do this by asking questions and asking the student to summarize. Simple as it may seem not all parents will do this. Many will not have the time, or feel that they do not.

The out of school summer programs should be geared towards the children whose parents who cannot afford to offer extracurricular and education experiences during the summer months. At the age of six, children's cognitive development increases at about twice the rate of an eight to nine year old says Entwisle (2001). For this reason it becomes imperative to have these learning experiences in the primary years of schooling of disadvantaged youth. The most important factor in a summer learning program is access to books claims Allington (2008). Low income students involved in an Atlanta reading program tended to read more on their own than did students not attending. Similar to the Atlanta study, in Baltimore, children who visited the library more often in the summertime and checked out more reading material performed better than other children. Little has been done by education policymakers to address the problem of a lack of access to books, but this has been shown through numerous amounts of research that summer reading setback causes a major source of the reading achievement gap. In fact, a study by Hayes and Grether (1983), shows that summer setback claims responsibility for 80% of the achievement gap between the rich and poor of students 14 years old. One reason for lower income students' lack of reading has to do with geography. Many live in areas with more restricted access to material. In a study by Neuman and Celano (2001) it was found that reading material in better off families was roughly 10 times greater than poorer population in the same urban area. So what can be done to decrease the summer learning gap?

Children must read during the summer. Many school systems may already know of how hard this may be for some students. Schools need to be involved in the education of students
even in the summer. Richard Allington and Anne McGill-Frazen (2008), suggest that increasing summer reading can help prevent low-income students from losing ground during vacation. In order to close the gap, Allington and Frazen (2008) sent home, through the mail, a total of 12 paperback books, all of which the children themselves chose to read over vacation. They found that over the three year study that the children that participated in the study had significantly higher scores than the children not participating. Children generally love the school library, but in the summer the library is often closed. In some towns, the public library requires only a brisk walk to arrive, but in other families this short distance requires a stretch many busy parents don't or can't make. Talk with school policymakers about opening during the long summer months. After all, school libraries are geared toward student interest and education and contain a very large supply of material. Also, schools could be involved with students at a disadvantage, and budget for sending books home over the summer to students with a low SES. Getting children to books is key.

Since such a wide learning loss gap surfaces between the low and higher socioeconomic children after a summer vacation an important step needs to target the attitudes of parents. Lower income families should never feel intimidated by a school system. Setting up a support system for all families would be an excellent way for parents and teachers to close the summer gap. If parents feel welcomed and comfortable in their child's learning atmosphere they will be more inclined to take part in their child's education. After that, expectations become higher and students perform better during school and out of school. Setting up a system where teachers, parents and students can join in on the learning creates many opportunities for closing the gap.

Give a child a book and grades will be up after the summer. Not true. Children need to be scaffolded in their literature reading. Although this is an important and necessary step, many
factors go into reading and interest level defines one of them. Rather than telling children they cannot read about their favorite superhero or a favorite character from a video game, let them. "This popular culture in a student's life enables them to build on prior knowledge," Allington (2008) tells, and can also create a slippery slope (a good one) in which friends and siblings want in on the fun too. An idea this great provides children the opportunity to swap books. Grabbing the interest of a child is easy, especially when the reading is authentic. Think about where you live. If a student lives in Florida, they are probably interested in learning about swamps, alligators, and other animal habitats they have visited. Books with topics such as these make learning fun, realistic, and access to these materials remain the first step in enhancing the reading in low-income students and a good idea for more affluent students too.

Practicing comprehension becomes another vital factor in closing the reading gap. James Kim (2004), assistant professor of education at Harvard University, supplies us with the ABCs of Improved Reading: "[A]ccess to books, [B]ooks that match readers' ability levels and interests, and [C]omprehension, as monitored and guided by an adult, teacher or parent" (p. 2). The most important piece to making summer reading effective requires the help of an adult who can ask questions and guide kids to better understand what they are reading. Teachers could probably think of hundreds of ways to test comprehension, but the best way to check for knowledge? Simply ask your child, "Hey what are you reading about?" To make sure the child understands what he/she reads, have them summarize and if they are questioning a difficult passage, have them reread it. The most important lesson here requires that parents or some responsible adult figure gets involved in the reading process.

One way to decrease the learning gap is trying in the first place to exclude factors associated with the gap. How, you might ask? A bit more of a drastic step in which the school
and community would need to be involved but has shown promise: a modified school calendar. This idea would not cause students to spend more time at school, but rather eliminate the long length of summer months by providing longer breaks during the school year. Harris Cooper's (2003) article explains that these programs are working, however, they do work more adequately for disadvantaged or poor-achieving students. A school calendar of this type would drastically reduce the learning loss due to skills being practiced on a more balanced basis. I suppose you could compare this to riding a bike. If you have not ridden in a while (summer break) it will be tough to get started again, although something you never forget. Generally, most students will not forget all that much on a two week break compared to a three month break. This modified calendar also provides families with many opportunities to take vacations, not just in the summer months, but throughout the year which may be a better time for some anyway. This enables students to have more life experiences and then come to school and share newfound knowledge with friends.

Obviously, students gain life experience from summer vacations, and yes, some do not lose reading ability, but many do. No single approach will close the academic gap between low and high-income children, but summer programs, even as simple as reading and asking questions, is absolutely essential in a nine month school calendar. As children go through the early years of school, especially the disadvantaged, teachers and parents need to become aware of the additional resources needed to stay at an academically sound level over summer break. This, of course, does not mean that students should stay inside practicing reading, writing, and arithmetic all summer. Volunteer programs, sports and other summer activities need to be encouraged to gain life experience and to polish problem solving skills. Truth be told, when left unpracticed, the educational gap widens over the summers and students lose crucial knowledge.
Leaders of the next generation need learning over the summer, and making this possible through funding and educating our parents can help.
Annotated Bibliography


This article previews with a story of a boy that was having a lot of difficulty in reading. His teachers worked persistently with him to get back to on level literacy and were successful. The teachers were dismayed when the boy came back after summer vacation to have forgotten all the hard learned knowledge and to be placed back on the lowest reading list. A compilation of research presented in this article explains what is needed for children to maintain an appropriate reading level over the summer. Some of the examples include providing low-income students with appropriate books and increasing the amount of reading during summer months. The project sent eight books to students through the mail during the summer to assist in this project.


A book by Boulay brings together research about summer learning and describes summer learning programs. The author explains how summer learning increases students scores and helps to close the gap of summer learning loss. The text also explains that the summer gap can get bigger and bigger over the years always restarting the cycle of catch-up when school starts again. He also mentions that the school calendar has not changed in many, many years. The school calendar is set up to were children have the time off to help families with the harvest which is no longer the norm of society.


The article examines the reason why children of low socioeconomic backgrounds benefit two thirds less than those of middle to high socioeconomic backgrounds during summer learning activities. Many forms of summer learning are open to the public, such as public libraries, but the article explains that children from low-income neighborhoods do not use the material as middle class children would; often picking easy to read material. The study also found that low and middle class students achieve at about the same rates during school but in the summer poorer children experience the "summer slide." The overall message of this research article is to give much needed support to the lower class students struggling for knowledge during the summer months.


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An interesting online article describes the concerns, research and remedies surrounding summer learning loss. The article recognizes that something may need to be done concerning the academic calendar due to it's creation so long ago when agriculture was at the heart of society. The study has many proofs of summer learning loss by comparing test scores with time gaps. I will be using this information for background into the school calendar and possible some research as it very detailed and important. The remedies presented in the article are as follows: extended school year, summer school, and modified school calendars.


A six week research study using a summer learning program, geared towards high-risk background students, provides promising improvements on the group that received the assistance. The article recognizes that students with low economic backgrounds suffer during the summer months. The purpose of the study was to investigate weather a summer learning program would have an effect on the students knowledge at the beginning of the next school year. This detailed study goes in depth about the benefits of the summer program including documented improvements on rhyming skills, letter-naming, and picture-naming.


This article is about a study started in 1982 and continues today. The authors chose to follow 790 random first grade students throughout their school years. The researchers found that no matter what the socioeconomic background, students test scores go up in the winter months and considerably down after returning from summer vacation. The article gives reasons for why poor children learn less over the summer compared to middle or high level children; one being parent attitude toward summer learning. Finally the authors note that it is necessary for children of low economic backgrounds to be involved in a summer learning program.