

Fulfilling the Promise of Literacy: A Summer Book Project

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A month into the new school year, a second-grade teacher stopped me in the hallway to ask about Kyle, one of my former Reading Recovery students. The teacher said he was in the lowest reading group, and she didn't see how his Reading Recovery intervention could have been discontinued last year. I couldn't understand it; he finished strong at the end of the year, reading a level 18 text with ease. I tried to explain this, but she looked skeptical. I told her I would work with him in a booster group to get him back up to speed, but I was disappointed that the classroom teacher didn't see the same child I saw at the end of the year. What could I do to prevent this in the future?



The What Works Clearinghouse reviewed the Year 1 results of the federally funded Investing in Innovation (i3) scale-up of Reading Recovery® (May et al., 2013), and the results confirm the findings of earlier studies (Pinnell, DeFord, & Lyons, 1988; Pinnell, Lyons, DeFord, Bryk, & Seltzer, 1994; Schwartz, 2005) showing Reading Recovery has a positive effect on the general reading achievement and reading comprehension of struggling first graders. The effects, which enable children to make the accelerated progress needed to catch up with their peers, are the result of 12–20 weeks of individualized instruction with a highly trained literacy professional. It is important to bear in mind, however, that Reading Recovery is only a short-term intervention and while children return to the regular classroom with literacy processing systems that are independent and strategic, they still need the support of high-quality classroom instruction and summer reading material.

Over 25 years ago, Stanovich (1986) used the term *the Matthew effect* as a metaphor for the achievement gap. The idea that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer comes from the Parable of the Talents in the Gospel of Matthew. The story relays how two workers invested and grew money entrusted to them and how another hid his money, and as result, received no return on it. Stanovich likens this to readers growing their reading ability. In other words, the more a child reads, the better reader he becomes. Summer is certainly a time when some children choose to read, read more, and become better readers while others do not invest time in reading and therefore receive no return. Compounding this problem, especially for children from low-income homes, is the lack of access to print, leaving them without a choice or the opportunity to invest (Neuman & Celano, 2001). Further, Allington and his colleagues (2010) showed that the “reading achievement of economically disadvantaged students slides back a few months every summer” (p. 412). This is alarming and has great implications for children who receive the Reading Recovery intervention, since many come from impoverished homes (Brymer-Bashore & McGee, 2010).

Implementing a Summer Book Project

From time to time, Reading Recovery teachers are asked about the progress of children with whom they have worked. Questions like “Are you sure this child had Reading Recovery?” imply the short-term intervention is solely responsible for a child’s reading level at the beginning of second grade. Knowing Reading Recovery should be one component of a comprehensive literacy program (Askew, Pinnell, & Scharer, 2014; Bryk, 2010; Dorn & Henderson, 2010), the Clemson University Reading Recovery Training Center for South Carolina (CUTC) has placed an emphasis in recent years on providing support for classroom teachers. While the increased collaboration between Reading Recovery and classroom teachers has been beneficial, we recognized a need to attend to the summer months as well.

In 2012, there was an increasing sense of urgency to find ways to support children during the summer months. We wanted to focus on maintaining the gains students made during the year, while at the same time fostering a love for reading. We wanted our vision of children sitting under a shade tree with a good book on a hot summer’s day to become a reality. In order to achieve this, we joined in conversation with the state department of education about the importance of summer reading. As a result, we were included in part of a larger statewide summer reading initiative that ultimately allowed us to purchase sets of 12 leveled texts for every child served in Reading Recovery. This article describes the project, results for the first cohort to receive books, lessons learned, and suggestions for starting a similar initiative on a large or small scale.

The schools and students

The 152 schools involved in the summer book flood are located across the state in 21 school districts; 28.4% of the schools are classified as urban, 19.2% as suburban/large town, and the remaining 52.4% are schools in small towns or rural areas. The majority of schools receive Title I funding.

The students participating in this project had all received Reading Recovery. Students in Reading Recovery comprise the lowest 20% of first graders in a given school and begin first grade ranked by their classroom teachers as well-below average. Student selection for Reading Recovery is confirmed by *An Observation Survey of Early Literacy Achievement* (Clay, 2013), a valid and reliable tool (Denton, Ciancio, & Fletcher, 2006) that provides

evidence that Reading Recovery children are significantly behind their average peers at the beginning of their lesson series. Of the students in the first cohort, 79.3% received free or reduced-price lunch. Socioeconomic issues coupled with the fact that these students are categorized as “struggling” placed them at greater risk of summer reading loss. Mraz and Rasinski (2007) remind us that struggling readers like those served in Reading Recovery are the ones who can least afford to fall behind.

The preparations

The first year we implemented the project, we had an accelerated timeline to select and purchase two sets of texts. We selected one set for children who had successfully completed the intervention (*discontinued*) and the other set for those who had made progress but did not discontinue (*recommended*). The discontinued set had text levels ranging from 12–20, and the recommended set contained texts ranging from levels 8–12. The average discontinuing text level for the state hovers around 18, and the recommended text level is typically a 10. Based on this information, we selected texts that would be in the children’s independent and instructional ranges. Additionally, we selected texts with familiar characters that would provide some support for children while reading independently. To save money, the books were not packaged in individual sets but instead were sent to districts in bulk to sort and distribute. When the books arrived, we immediately received phone calls from some of the larger districts expressing disbelief at the palettes of books. While the arrival of the books was a little overwhelming, the teacher leaders and teachers were so excited about the benefits for children that they immediately began working to organize and prepare the books for delivery. This included finding local businesses to donate “book bags” that assisted children in carrying the books home. Included in each bag was a summer reading log and personalized letter explaining the importance of summer reading.

The results

At the end of the first summer when the children returned to school, the Reading Recovery teachers were ready and waiting. As part of our arrangement with the state department of education, we agreed to test every child within the first 2 weeks of school. We used the Scott Foresman Leveled Text Reading Passages to show spring-to-fall text level gains. In the United States, these passages are used for the Text Reading task of the Observation Survey and



Boxes of individual books were sorted and distributed in book bags donated by local businesses. Included in each child's bag was a summer reading log and personalized letter explaining the importance of summer reading.

are considered a standard measure for reporting students' progress. The Text Reading passages consist of Levels 1–10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20, 22, 24, 26, 28, and 30, with alternative passages at levels 8, 9, 10, 12, 14, and 16. The teachers used the alternative passages when possible, but there were times when children may have encountered a text they read at the end of the previous school year. In addition to administering the leveled passages, the teachers also collected student summer reading logs, but less than 50% were returned. (In subsequent years, we have not required teachers to send home reading logs, however, some continue to use them.)

The overall results for the first cohort showed a slight summer decline (see Table 1). It is important, however, to further examine how certain subgroups fared by looking at the disaggregated data. For example, the discontinued subgroup declined but maintained an average text level of 18.7, which would be considered on grade level at the beginning of second grade. Our greatest concern surfaced when examining the results for the free and reduced lunch and Black male and Black female subgroups. Even though these subgroups included all children served, both discon-

tinued and recommended, we were especially sensitive to the change in text reading level from end of first grade to the beginning of second.

Reconsidering the Selected Texts

We discussed many possible reasons for the decline in text reading level and hypothesized it related to the texts we selected including the type and level. We were especially cognizant of Clay's considerations for choosing new text and we reexamined our selections to determine if they were "facilitative, highly motivating books" (Clay, 2005, p. 89). During data analysis, we revisited chapter 3, "Reading Continuous Texts, Whole Stories, and Information Books" in *Literacy Lesson Designed for Individuals Part Two* (Clay, 2005). As part of this process, we reframed several of the statements Clay presents in this section (p. 90) into question form to help us rethink the texts we had selected and to inform future text selection: Did we select books that children (a) will want to read? (b) can relate to some personal knowledge? and (c) will succeed with and enjoy?

In answering these questions, we realized we had selected texts we knew teachers loved, but we were not 100% certain children loved. The social and emotional dimensions of learning are an integral part of the Reading Recovery lesson, and the supportive relationships teachers build with their students are crucial (Lyons, 2003). In light of this, we discussed the familiar reading component of the lesson and talked about comments we make when children select books. We wondered how statements like, "I was hoping you would pick that book, it is my favorite!" influence children's subsequent book choices and teachers' perceptions about the types of text in which a child may be interested. In other words, are students more

Table 1. 2011–2012 Cohort Average Text Reading Level at End of Grade 1/Beginning of Grade 2

Cohort	End of Grade 1	Fall of Grade 2	Change
All children	16.9	16.1	-0.8
Discontinued	19.5	18.7	-0.8
Free Lunch	16.3	15.3	-1.0
Reduced Lunch	18.1	17.5	-0.6
Black Males	16.2	14.7	-1.5
Black Females	16.2	15.1	-1.1

Table 2. Changes in Grade 1 Book Sets and Text Levels from 2011–2012 to 2012–2013

	Discontinued	Not Discontinued/Recommended
2011-12	Levels 12–20 Familiar Themes & Characters	Levels 8–12 Familiar Themes & Characters
2012-13	Levels 10-18 Familiar Themes & Characters <i>Victor and the Martian</i>	Levels 6–10 Familiar Themes & Characters <i>Sleep Tight, Spaceboy</i>
Boys		
Girls	<i>The New House</i>	<i>Best Friends</i>
Boys	Nonfiction <i>Skateboarding, Working Dogs</i>	Nonfiction <i>Snakes, The Great White Shark</i>
Girls	<i>Butterflies, Penguins</i>	<i>Horses, Dolphins</i>
Boys	Culturally Relevant <i>Martin Luther King, Pickles & The Hole</i>	Culturally Relevant <i>Pickles Helps Out</i>
Girls	<i>Rosa Parks</i>	<i>Friends on Earth</i>
Boys	By Authors Easily Found in Libraries <i>Dinosaurs, Dinosaurs</i> by Byron Barton <i>Just Me and My Dad</i> by Mercer Mayer	By Authors Easily Found in Libraries <i>Foot Book</i> by Dr. Seuss <i>All By Myself</i> by Mercer Mayer
Girls	<i>Great Day for Up</i> by Dr. Seuss <i>Just Grandma and Me</i> by Mercer Mayer	<i>Foot Book</i> by Dr. Seuss <i>Just Me and My Babysitter</i> by Mercer Mayer

likely to pick a particular title because they know their teacher likes it? Upon further examination of the texts we selected, we realized we needed to provide more culturally relevant (Boyd, Causey, & Galda, 2015; Jimenez, 1997) and informational texts (Duke, 2004).

As a result, we refined our book selection for the following summer. We expanded from two text sets, one for

discontinued and one for recommended subgroups, to four sets. By expanding the book sets, we were better able to answer the questions raised about book selection, and although we still included texts with familiar themes and characters, we also included more culturally relevant and informational texts. Table 2 provides an example of how the first-grade set expanded. As the project has grown, and additional grade levels have been added, we have continued to carefully select texts based on what we learned.

Table 3. 2011-2012 Cohort Average Text Reading Level at End of Grade 2/Beginning of Grade 3

Cohort	End of Grade 2	Fall of Grade 3	Change
All children	23.6	24.1	+0.4
Discontinued	25.9	26.5	+0.6
Free Lunch	22.9	23.3	+0.4
Reduced Lunch	24.9	25.1	+0.2
Black Males	22.1	22.4	+0.3
Black Females	22.8	23.3	+0.5

In addition to the changes we made in the book sets, we also encouraged teachers in the second year to preview the books with children as a means of increasing student engagement with the texts (Kim, 2007). To do this, some teachers met individually with children to provide an overview of the plot and to share a few pages aloud. Others used a small-group format and some invited their students and parents to a meeting to give them the books and explain the importance of reading during the summer months. Following the second summer book flood, all groups showed gains and we feel these were attributed to the types of books and the levels we selected (see Table 3).



Students in 152 schools in 21 districts participated in the Clemson summer book flood project. They were part of a larger statewide summer reading initiative in conjunction with the state department of education that ultimately allowed Clemson to purchase sets of 12 leveled texts for every child served in Reading Recovery.

In fact, when teachers were interviewed about the project, they commented that the books selected were beneficial for students. “The children were very excited to get the books. They loved receiving books with characters they already knew (Rosie, Bella, etc.),” shared one Reading Recovery teacher in Rockhill, SC. “Also, the books were high interest books of both fiction and nonfiction. Students commented these were books they could read and were excited to keep them at home.”

These same sentiments were echoed by parents, like this one in Anderson, SC: “The books were treasured by my child and he shared them with his brother and sisters. We are so happy to have books that he enjoys. Everyone has loved them, read them, listened to them, and looked at the pictures. In fact, I know the Little Dinosaur book by heart!”

Lessons Learned

In *Change Over Time in Children’s Literacy Development*, Clay (2001) wrote:

The texts which a teacher chooses for a child can facilitate or constrain the opportunities that a child gets to process text information, and the difficulty level of those texts relative to the child’s current skills will create or constrain the opportunities for the child to use what he or she knows in the service of independently learning more through reading. (p. 207)

Examining how the texts we selected facilitated or constrained opportunities for the child was the most important lesson we learned. Our experiences in Read-

ing Recovery confirm the notion that to build and refine a processing system, children need access to “just right” books, and this was doubly important during the summer months. We found using texts children can read well and want to read assists in moving their systems forward and may prevent summer reading loss. McGill-Franzen stated in an interview in the June/July 2010 issue of *Reading Today* that struggling readers often self-select books that are too difficult, and the first summer we were involved in this project, we did, too. We realized the first book set contained texts that may have presented challenges to some of our students, especially those who did not have home support. The following summer, we included easier books in the sets for all children. Since the average discontinuing text level at the end of the year is approximately an 18, we included books ranging from levels 10–18 in the sets. For our recommended subgroup, who on average completed the series of lessons reading at level 10, we included books ranging from 6–10.

We also made different sets for boys and girls so we could tailor our selections to better reflect student interests. Since two of the major subgroups—discontinued Black males and discontinued Black females—did not make the progress we had hoped, we added more culturally relevant text. In addition, we expanded the sets to not only include books with familiar themes and characters but informational text as well. In summary, the book sets after the first year of the project contained lower levels and more diverse and nonfiction texts. We also included books by authors the children could find in the library; Mercer Mayer and Dr. Seuss, for example. Teachers from all over the state shared their excitement about the new books:

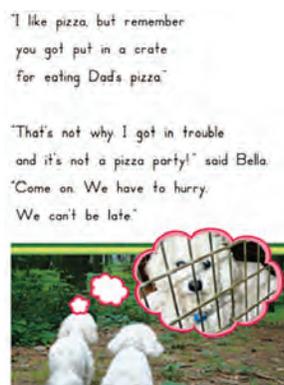
“LOVE LOVE LOVE it! Our kids are always thrilled to get their hands on books that will belong to them. Many of our kids don’t have opportunities to go to the library or to get new books, so they love this project. I love how the books are on their levels and they are able to actually read them!” Statements like this helped us know the books we selected were supportive.

Starting a Summer Reading Project

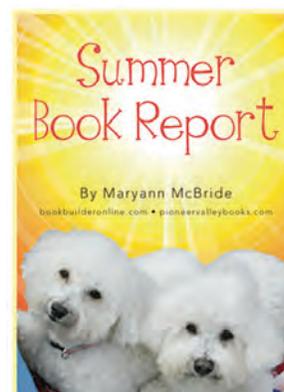
Reducing the effects of summer reading loss was accomplished with a budget of approximately \$50 dollars a child, which is significantly less expensive than most summer school programs — especially when factoring in expenses like bus transportation and teacher salaries. While we were and continue to be involved in a large-scale ongoing state initiative, an individual Reading Recovery teacher, school, or site could easily implement a similar project. Sharing the effects of summer reading setback with local boards of education may help bring awareness to the need for summer reading material. There are also several grant opportunities (see endnote) that could assist. Once funding is secured, consider the lessons we learned when implementing the project like the importance of including culturally relevant and nonfiction text in the book sets. Finally, we recommend sharing a customizable book with each child when they return in the fall. As part of the project, Maryann McBride created two books about summer reading (shown at right) that can be personalized with the child’s name and are available for free. When children come back to school, sharing this custom-made text is a great way to celebrate the project and is yet another opportunity to send a book home!

Final Thoughts

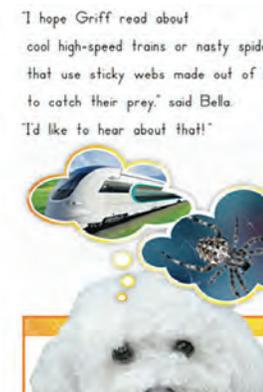
In *Promising Literacy for Every Child: Reading Recovery and a Comprehensive Literacy System* (Askew, Pinnell, & Scharer, 2014), we are asked how we will fulfill the promise of literacy for every child. This question is really a charge for Reading Recovery professionals to contemplate how to contribute to children’s long-term success. In response to the question, the authors call us to work collaboratively and communicate with families, both of which have a direct connection to summer reading. By adopting a team approach that involves interaction with families, we can unite to ameliorate summer reading setback and champion children’s ongoing literacy learning.



<http://bookbuilderonline.com/books/the-celebration/builds/new>



<http://bookbuilderonline.com/books/summer-book-report/builds/new>



Sharing custom-made text is a great way to celebrate a summer reading project. Personalized books like these can be created and printed using a free online service, like this one provided by Pioneer Valley Books.

Endnote:
Assistance for summer reading programs

- NEA Student Achievement Grants — \$2,000–\$5,000
February 1, June 1, October 15 deadlines
<http://www.neafoundation.org/pages/nea-student-achievement-grants/>
- Target — \$2,000; April 30 deadline
<https://corporate.target.com/corporate-responsibility/grants/early-childhood-reading-grants/>
- Donors Choose — Amount varies; ongoing
<http://www.donorschoose.org/about>
- First Book — Provides books; ongoing
www.firstbook.org

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