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Research into Practice

Unfinished Learning: Accelerating Student Catch-Up through Literacy Engagement

by Jim Cummins, Ph.D

During the past year, educators and students around the world have experienced a profound transformation of teaching and learning brought about by the global pandemic. Teachers have struggled to engage students in the absence of face-to-face interactions, limited access to curriculum materials, and the challenge of switching to online and/or hybrid modes of instruction. Students have experienced social isolation from their friends and, in many cases, boredom and lack of motivation have resulted from trying to learn in front of a screen for several hours each day. Many students from low-income families have experienced the additional challenges of overcrowded living conditions, inadequate access to technology and the Internet, and greater stress within the family as a result of economic and nutritional insecurity.

Not surprisingly, significant learning loss is predicted for K-12 students, particularly those coming from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Teacher surveys carried out in the United States and other countries by the McKinsey Consulting Company (Dorn et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2021) found that students have paid a heavy price in lost learning. Additionally, teachers reported that the stress and isolation of online learning have resulted in an increase in mental health issues among young people. The adverse impact has been especially severe among students in high-poverty schools. Teachers in these schools reported that virtual classes were especially ineffective, suggesting that the pandemic may have exacerbated educational inequalities.

Several studies have reported greater losses in math than in reading. For example, in the United States context, Kuhfeld et al. (2020: 556) reported that "students were projected to end the abbreviated 2019–2020 school year with roughly 63% to 68% of the learning gains in reading but only 37% to 50% of the average gains in mathematics compared with those of a normal school year."

The larger learning gaps in math, in comparison to reading, are not surprising. Math instruction typically follows a sequential progression where concepts and skills are built on the basis of previously learned concepts and skills. Thus, learning gaps at any point in the sequence often entail long-term impacts. By contrast, concepts, skills, and knowledge in language arts and literacy

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development are not locked into a rigid instructional and acquisition sequence. One implication of this reality is that students are potentially less 'instructionally dependent' with respect to their reading development than is the case with the learning of mathematical skills and concepts.

This raises the question of the extent to which we might be able to accelerate students' literacy development by supplementing the 'time-on-task' they experience in formal instruction with additional 'time-on-task' in out-of-school settings. The research evidence suggests that we could significantly enhance students' reading development through the simple, but under-utilized strategy of getting them actively engaged with reading (and ideally writing) both within the context of formal schooling and in out-of-school contexts.

Before discussing these possibilities, let me be clear about one point. I am not suggesting that instruction is unimportant for literacy development. On the contrary, in this period of human history, perhaps more than in any previous era, the role of teachers is crucial is enabling students to develop not only strong foundational skills in basic reading and writing, but also the critical thinking skills that determine our ability to distinguish reality from fantasy, truth from falsity, evidence from simple assertion. A major component of reading comprehension is the ability to use textual evidence to acquire information and draw accurate inferences and conclusions. Teachers, working with engaging curriculum materials, nurture these habits of mind that are a prerequisite for rational discussion of the many complex issues facing our societies.

How Can We Accelerate Literacy Development?

A common theme in discussions of how to support students in bridging the opportunity gaps caused by the pandemic involves increasing the amount of time that students spend in formal instruction. The McKinsey reports, for example, suggest that students "will likely need additional learning hours to make up the loss. That can come through extended school-day and structured after-school programs, weekend school, and summer school programs that already have proven benefits" (Dorn et al., 2020). These initiatives are obviously all potentially valuable. However, caution should be exercised in simply increasing the amount of formal instruction in light of the fact that many teachers are experiencing burnout (Pressley, 2020) and additional intensive instruction may not be conducive to restoring a sense of well-being to students already stressed by more than a year of social and educational disruption.

An alternative approach that can complement the provision of additional literacy instruction involves enhancing students' opportunity to read. In introducing the construct of opportunity to read, Elfrieda Hiebert and Leigh Ann Martin (2010) pointed out that in any sphere of human endeavour—medical diagnosis, flying an aircraft, or programming computers—people become proficient by participating extensively in the activity. However, when it comes to teaching students to read in schools, policymakers, researchers, and many educators have paid little attention to ensuring that students get ample opportunities to actually engage in reading. Hiebert and Martin describe 'opportunity to read' as a critical but neglected construct in reading instruction.

The concept of opportunity to read implies that students should have extensive access to written language and become actively engaged with reading and/or writing. There is overwhelming research evidence that print access and literacy engagement play a causal role in increasing literacy achievement. I briefly review this evidence in the sections that follow, focusing initially on the effects of summer reading loss and interventions to reverse this loss, and secondly on the broader research findings regarding the impact of literacy engagement on literacy achievement.

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These findings are relevant in the present context because they demonstrate that the positive impact of increasing summer reading among low-income students is equivalent to the impact of more formal summer school instruction. Thus, as a strategy to reverse the pandemic-induced learning loss experienced by many low-income students, getting students actively involved in reading is too important to ignore. This high impact, low-stress, and enjoyable intervention can serve either as a complement to additional literacy instruction or, in some cases, as an alternative for students who may not be able to participate in more formal instructional interventions during the summer.

Reversing Summer Reading Loss

Why is the research on summer reading loss relevant to planning interventions to reverse the declines in literacy development experienced by many students during the pandemic? Obviously, the pandemic is a unique event in all our lives, and thus we have no direct previous experience or data upon which to base our educational response. However, we *do* have an enormous amount of research data, dating back to the early 1900s, on an analogous phenomenon—the interruption of formal instruction that takes place for two months every summer.

This research shows very clearly that over the summer months students from low-income families lose significant ground in reading development in comparison to students from middle-class families. According to reading researchers Richard Allington and Ann McGill-Franzen (2017: 172) this difference amounts to about 3 months of reading development. They point out that "children from low-income families were observed to lose some of their academic proficiencies related to reading over the summer vacation months while middle class children actually added reading proficiency over those same months."

Allington and McGill-Franzen's (2017, 2018) comprehensive review of summer reading loss among low-income students and the effects of summer reading programs documented the powerful negative impact of very limited access to books on low-income students' reading achievement. During the school year, students in both high-poverty and low-poverty schools made similar gains in reading achievement. However, during the summer months, between grade 2 and grade 6, students in high-poverty schools fell significantly behind students in more affluent schools, and this loss accounted for about 80% of the overall differences in reading achievement at the grade 6 level between these two groups of students.

Underlying this summer reading loss is the significant gap between low-income and more affluent students in access to books, which has been documented by numerous research studies (e.g., Duke, 2000):

> Children from low-income families live in neighborhoods that offer fewer locations to buy or borrow books, attend schools where the numbers of books available are more limited, and live in homes where few books are found. . . . All this leads to some children spending summers with restricted access to books that could be read. This lack of access means that these children are less likely to read during the summer months. (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2017: 175-176)

The limited access to books experienced by students from low-income families, and the associated summer reading loss, can be significantly reduced by providing low-income students with access to self-selected books for voluntary reading. The positive impact of this intervention on reading development was about the same as the impact of attending summer school. However, the cost of the books distributed (about $50 per student) was substantially lower than the cost of formal instruction in summer school (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2017, 2018).

> "... summer reading loss, can be significantly reduced by providing low-income students with access to self-selected books for voluntary reading."

Clearly, this is a low-stress and cost-effective option that should be seriously considered by educators and policymakers committed to supporting students catch up to grade expectations in literacy development.

The Impact of Literacy Engagement on Reading Achievement

The extensive empirical research supporting the relationship between literacy engagement and reading achievement in both monolingual and multilingual educational contexts has been reviewed in multiple publications (e.g., Guthrie, 2004; Hiebert & Martin, 2010; Krashen, 2004; Lindsay, 2010, 2018). This relationship has been repeatedly documented in the large-scale surveys of educational performance in countries around the world that have been carried out over the past 20+ years by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2004, 2010). This project, entitled *Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA) has reported the following findings:

- The level of a student's reading engagement "is a better predictor of literacy performance than his or her socioeconomic background, indicating that cultivating a student's interest in reading can help overcome home disadvantages' (OECD, 2004: 8).

- The OECD (2010) reported that approximately one-third of the relationship between reading performance and students' socioeconomic background was mediated by reading engagement. In other words, there was about a one-third overlap between the negative effects of low SES and the positive effects of reading engagement. The implication is that schools can potentially 'push back' about one-third of the negative effects of socioeconomic disadvantage by ensuring that students have access to a print-rich environment and become actively engaged with literacy.

Cognitive psychologist, John Guthrie (2004: 5) summarized the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and PISA data, noting that 9-year-old students in the 1998 NAEP study:

> Those whose family background was characterized by low income and low education, but who were highly engaged readers, substantially outscored students who came from backgrounds with higher education and higher income, but who themselves were less engaged readers. Based on a massive sample, this finding suggests the stunning conclusion that engaged reading can overcome traditional barriers to reading achievement, including gender, parental education, and income.

Many other studies, reviews, and meta-analyses demonstrate the same pattern of significant relationships between print access/literacy engagement and reading achievement among both monolingual and bilingual students (e.g., Allington and McGill-Franzen, 2017, 2018; Cummins, 2021; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Elley, 1991; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Krashen 2004; Lindsay, 2010, 2018; Mol & Bus, 2011).

> "… engaging students actively in literacy activities, both in school and in out-of-school contexts, promotes literacy achievement."

In summary, there is persuasive evidence from multiple sources that engaging students actively in literacy activities, both in school and in out-of-school contexts, promotes literacy achievement. Although most of the research has focused on reading, it seems appropriate to broaden the focus from simply *reading engagement* to *literacy engagement* in light of the fact that there is considerable research documenting the role of extensive writing not only in developing writing expertise but also in improving reading comprehension (Graham & Herbert, 2010).

Implications for Bridging Learning Gaps

Research documenting the powerful impact of literacy engagement carries some obvious implications for instruction during the regular school year as well as for summer intervention programs. In developing school-based policies focused on print access and literacy engagement, educators might discuss issues such as the following:

- To what extent is our school library stocked with culturally relevant and engaging books that students are encouraged to check out and read at home?
- To what extent do our students have access to classroom libraries (hard copy or electronic) that they can use for independent reading within class and at home?
- To what extent do our school and classroom libraries include books and other reading materials in English learners' home languages?
- To what extent do we work with parents to ensure that they know about local public libraries and get library cards for their children?
- To what extent do we schedule whole class and/or small group discussions of books or reading selections that encourage students to think more deeply about issues and allow us, as teachers, to communicate our enthusiasm for reading?

Allington and McGill-Franzen (2017) have articulated four strategies specifically focused on eliminating summer reading loss among low-income students. These are paraphrased below:

- Prior to the end of the school year, enable students to self-select engaging and culturally relevant books to read over the summer holidays. The number of books will likely depend on their length and the age of the students. Allington and McGill-Franzen note that in the spring book fair they organized, children could select 10-15 books from roughly 500 different books that were displayed. The books students selected were given to them on the final day of school.

- Open the school library one or two days a week over the summer. “A library that is closed for the summer months in a high-poverty neighborhood is an underused library” (2017: 180).
- Organize a book exchange at the school three or four weeks after the end of the regular school year. Students can exchange any of the books that they have finished reading for additional books that they want to read.
- Schedule a book bus to travel to low-income neighborhoods on a weekly basis during the summer. Students (and possibly their parents) then simply walk to the book bus to check out books for summer voluntary reading.

> “. . . motivating students to engage with literacy involves a socialization process that goes beyond simply solitary reading.”

A final point to note is that motivating students to engage with literacy involves a socialization process that goes beyond simply solitary reading. Reading theorist Frank Smith (1988) pointed out more than 30 years ago that all learning is social and developing strong literacy skills involves *joining the literacy club* where learners engage in reading and writing together with their classmates who are also members of the club: “The classroom should be a place full of meaningful and useful reading and writing activities, where participation is possible without evaluation and collaboration is always available’ (1988: 12). Thus, bringing students together during the summer, either in the context of summer school or organized book exchanges or library days, would give students an opportunity to discuss with their classmates the books they have read and perhaps even make a case as to why their favorite book should be nominated ‘Book of the Summer.’

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