



Article

Impact of the Reading Buddies Program on Reading Level and Attitude Towards Reading

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Abstract

Objective – This research examines the Reading Buddies program at the Grande Prairie Public Library, which took place in July and August of 2011 and 2012. The Reading Buddies program pairs lower elementary students with teen volunteers for reading practice over the summer. The aim of the study was to discover how much impact the program would have on participating children's reading levels and attitudes towards reading.

Methods – During the first and last sessions of the Reading Buddies program, the participants completed the Elementary Reading Attitudes Survey (ERAS) and the Graded Word Recognition Lists from the *Bader Reading and Language Inventory* (6th ed., 2008). Participants were also asked for their grade and sex, and the program coordinator kept track of attendance.

Results – There were 37 Reading Buddies participants who completed both the pre- and post-tests for the study. On average, the program had a small positive effect on participants' reading levels and a small negative effect on their attitudes towards reading. There was a larger range of changes to the ERAS scores than to the reading test scores, but most participants' scores did not change dramatically on either measure.

Conclusions – Although findings are limited by the small size of the data-set, results indicate that many of the Reading Buddies participants maintained their reading level over the summer and had a similar attitude towards reading at the end of the program. On average, reading levels increased slightly and attitudes towards reading were slightly more negative. Many factors could not be taken into account during the study (e.g., the amount of reading done at home). A study with a control group that did not participate in the program could help to assess whether the program helped to combat summer learning loss.

Introduction

The Reading Buddies program was a new program in 2011 at Grande Prairie Public Library. This program is modelled on the Partners in Reading program that took place at this library from 1990 to 2008. In 2011, the program was adapted to reflect the current needs of the community.

The new program was intended to pair teen volunteers with lower elementary students for reading practice and fun activities over the summer. In 2011, Grade 1 to 4 students were invited to participate in the program. In 2012, this was changed to Grades 1 to 3, as there was greater demand for the program from families of younger students in 2011. The large age range also made it difficult to plan developmentally appropriate group activities. The program was marketed towards struggling readers, but children at any reading level could participate in the program.

Volunteer recruitment expanded to include college students and some adults when it became clear that we would have far more child participants than teenage volunteers. In 2011 there were 19 teen and 9 adult volunteers. (As some of the teens volunteered for more than one session, 28 of the 37 pairs had teen volunteers.)

In 2012, there were 29 teen and 5 adult volunteers and of the 44 pairs, 39 had teen volunteers. In 2011, volunteers attended an hour-long training session before the start of the program, in which they learned ways to facilitate the reading process. In 2012, we extended the training session to one and a half hours to accommodate activities and discussion about strategies for reading with their partners, rather than the simple presentation we had done the year before.

Each year, the program ran for seven weeks during the summer. Each session of Reading Buddies was an hour and a half long. Approximately one hour of this time was spent in one-on-one reading. The pairs also had the option of using literacy-based games and activities during this time. The other half hour was spent in group activities, including storytimes, puppet shows, and interactive story-based activities.

Reading Buddies gives children the opportunity to practice reading throughout the summer, a time when many children fall behind in reading fluency. In order to be successful, Reading Buddies should have an impact on the children who participate. The study was designed to assess the program's impact on the children's reading abilities and attitudes towards reading.

Literature Review

The Summer Reading Gap

There are few who doubt the importance of the ability to read. Reading is necessary for success in a world in which text is a major medium for communication. Children who are fluent readers will be more successful in school and as adults, but attaining that level of reading ability requires practice (Ross, 2006). As elementary students, children will naturally learn at different rates and be subject to outside influences such as socio-economic status and family literacy.

Research in education has identified what is known as the “summer reading gap.” This is a phenomenon in which some children maintain or increase their reading level over the summer holiday, whereas other students seem to go backwards in development (Roman, Carran, & Fiore, 2010). This effect is cumulative, leading to greater and greater discrepancies in ability as children progress through school. The summer reading gap has also been linked to socio-economic status, as students from higher income families tend to have greater access to libraries and other learning opportunities during the summer months (McGill-Franzen & Allington, 2003).

As Heyns (1978) initially pointed out, public libraries are in a unique position to address the summer reading gap. Not only are they open during the summer, but libraries have been offering variations of the summer reading program for over a century (Roman et al., 2010). Today, almost all libraries offer free, structured reading programs for children of all ages. This programming serves to motivate children to continue reading while they are out of school, and thus may serve to prevent or limit summer learning loss.

Although there is a field of research addressing the summer reading gap from the education perspective, relatively little literature directly

examines how summer reading programs in libraries impact student achievement. Heyns’s (1978) study found that children who participated in summer reading programs gained more vocabulary than children who did not, regardless of socioeconomic status, gender, or number of books read. Roman et al. (2010) recently conducted a large-scale longitudinal study, comparing students who participated in summer reading programs at libraries with students who did not. Overall, this study showed that children who participated in voluntary summer reading programs increased their reading levels more than children who did not. In the research that does exist, it seems that *voluntary* participation in a reading program has more impact than forced reading, whether at home, summer school, or the library. It appears that the greatest factor in summer reading achievement may be access to and regular use of library materials and programs.

Reading Partner Programs

There have been a number of studies on tutoring programs for reading skills. Many of these programs took place in schools and run throughout the school year (Block & Dellamura, 2001; Burns, Senesac, & Silbergliitt, 2008; Fitzgerald, 2001; Gattis et al., 2001; LaGue & Wilson, 2010; Marios, 2000; Paterson & Elliott, 2006; Theurer & Schmidt, 2008; Vadasy, Jenkins, Antil, Wayne, & O’Connor, 1997). Several programs specifically targeted students at risk of reading failure (Burns et al., 2008; Fitzgerald, 2001; Gattis et al., 2001; LaGue & Wilson, 2010; Paterson & Elliott, 2006; Vadasy et al., 1997).

All of these programs showed an improvement in the students’ reading abilities. Burns et al. (2008) studied the long-term effects of a reading program, and found that two years after the Help One Student to Succeed (HOSTS) program, HOSTS students had higher fluency, comprehension, and reading progress scores than non-HOSTS students.

The length of the program is an important factor. Fitzgerald's (2001) study of a tutoring program compared a group of students who received tutoring for a full term and students who were tutored for less than the full term. The students who were tutored for the full term showed higher gains in reading ability. Fitzgerald also noted that students showed greater growth in the second half of the program, and that different skills improved at different points in the program: during the first half, students showed more improvement in phonological awareness, whereas in the second half there was greater improvement in reading words.

The tutors also impacted the effectiveness of the programs. The age of tutors does not appear to be an important factor: programs with volunteers who were peers (LaGue & Wilson, 2010), older students (Block & Dellamura, 2001; Marios, 2000; Paterson & Elliot, 2006; Theurer & Schmidt, 2008), college students (Fitzgerald, 2001), adults (Jalongo, 2005), or a mix of community volunteers (Gattis et al., 2010; Vadasy et al., 1997), all showed improvements in students' reading. In all of these studies, tutors received some form of training. Vadasy et al. (1997) studied a program with very structured lesson plans and found that the "children whose tutors implemented the lessons as designed demonstrated significantly higher reading and spelling achievement" (Lesson Content section, para. 2). Though not studied in depth, Theurer and Schmidt (2008) noted that while some of the "fifth-grade buddies were naturals and interacted comfortably with the first graders, others seemed uncertain and tentative, not quite knowing what was expected of them" (p. 261). They integrated training on choosing books, reading strategies, and interpersonal skills into the program.

Because these studies look at programs that are based in schools and run throughout the school year, the programs are longer than our summer Reading Buddies program, which runs for seven weeks. As shown in Fitzgerald's (2001) study,

the length of the program can impact the students' gains in reading.

The structure of the programs studied varied, and it is difficult to compare the effects of each program. Vadasy et al.'s (1997) conclusions support a more structured program. Our Reading Buddies program was loosely structured, with the majority of the time spent reading one on one with the volunteers, so it is important to have a closer look at the effects of a loosely structured program on students' reading abilities.

Reading Abilities and Attitudes

Reading Buddies aims to improve children's reading abilities, but also to instill a positive attitude about reading. The two factors are intricately related. It seems that students who have a negative attitude about reading are less likely to read voluntarily and will read less overall than their reading-positive companions (Sainsbury & Schagen, 2004). Over time, this leads to larger and larger gaps in ability between students. Research has indicated that reading achievement and attitudes about reading are related among elementary students (Diamond & Onwuegbuzie, 2001). Indeed, McKenna and Kear (1990) developed the Elementary Reading Attitudes Survey (ERAS) as another way (besides reading tests) for teachers to assess their students.

Logan and Johnston (2009) studied over 200 students in order to compare reading abilities and attitudes between boys and girls. They found that girls had more positive attitudes towards reading overall, and that this was correlated with their reading ability. Interestingly, the relationship between reading attitude and ability was found to be weaker in boys than in girls.

The Dominican Study (Roman et al., 2010) revealed that most librarians perceived that their programs had a positive effect on students' reading levels and attitudes about reading.

Block and Dellamura (2001) also observed that children placed a higher value on reading at the end of their tutoring program. However, the students' attitudes about reading were never directly tested in either program.

Aims

The goal of the study was to test two hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 1: Children enrolled in the Reading Buddies program will have better reading skills at the end of the program than at the start of the program.
- Hypothesis 2: Children enrolled in the Reading Buddies program will have a more positive attitude towards reading at the end of the program than at the start of the program.

Methods

Reading Test

We used the Graded Word Recognition Lists from the *Bader Reading and Language Inventory* (6th ed., 2008) to test the participants' reading skills. The Graded Word Recognition Lists "can serve as a quick check of the student's word recognition and word analysis abilities" (Bader & Pearce, 2008, p. 4). They do not measure other reading skills such as comprehension.

The test consists of several lists of progressively more difficult words. This test was chosen because it covered a wide range of reading levels (preschool to high school), had been updated recently, and could be easily administered within the limited time we had available. While the test is American, the words chosen did not reflect any regional spelling variations. Differences in the American and Canadian school systems may have made the grade level results inaccurate; however, we were interested only in the change in reading level, not the grade levels themselves.

The test was administered one on one during the first and last sessions of the Reading Buddies program.

Elementary Reading Attitudes Survey

We used a modified version of the ERAS, or Elementary Reading Attitudes Survey (McKenna & Kear, 1990), to evaluate how participants' attitudes about reading changed over the duration of the Reading Buddies program. This survey was originally developed as a way for teachers to determine how their students felt about reading. It has also been used for research studies about reading attitudes (Black, 2006; Martinez, Aricak, & Jewell, 2008; Worrel, Roth, & Gabelko, 2002), mostly in school settings.

The ERAS uses images of the popular comic book character, Garfield, to elicit participants' emotional responses about reading. Questions ask "How do you feel ...?" about a reading-related activity and participants circle one of four images of Garfield that corresponds with their feeling.

The ERAS was extensively tested during its development to determine its validity and reliability. After the format and items had been decided upon, the researchers administered the test to over 18,000 first- to sixth-grade students across the United States. Calculation of Cronbach's Alpha revealed high internal consistency of items within each sub-scale. To determine the validity of the survey, participants were asked directly about their reading habits and other activities. High scores on the survey, indicating a very positive attitude towards reading, were correlated with literary activities such as good access to school and public libraries. Low scores on the survey were correlated with non-literary activities such as large amounts of television-watching.

The survey contains two sub-scales, one measuring recreational reading and one measuring academic reading. For the purposes

of this research, we only used the first sub-scale. We chose to eliminate the second sub-scale because of frequent references to the school context, which are not suited to our purpose.

In each year of the study, the ERAS survey was administered to the groups of Reading Buddies participants during the first and last sessions of the program. The 10 questions of the first sub-scale were read aloud to the participants, who completed their own paper copy of the survey.

Demographics and Program Participation

As part of the ERAS, participants were also asked for their grade and sex. During the program, attendance records were kept, so there was a record of how many sessions each child attended.

Results

In 2011, 19 out of the 37 children participating in the program completed both the pre- and post-tests. In 2012, there were 18 Reading Buddies participants who took part in the study (although only 17 completed both the pre- and post-test of the ERAS), for a total of 37 study participants over two years.

Nineteen of the study participants were boys and 18 were girls. The breakdown of grades they had just completed was as follows:

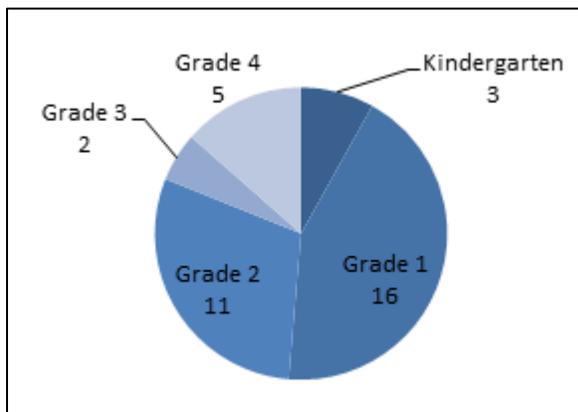


Figure 1
Grades completed by Reading Buddies participants

During registration, we asked that parents register their children in Reading Buddies only if they expected to be able to attend at least five of the seven sessions. Figure 2 shows the number of participants grouped by the number of sessions they attended.

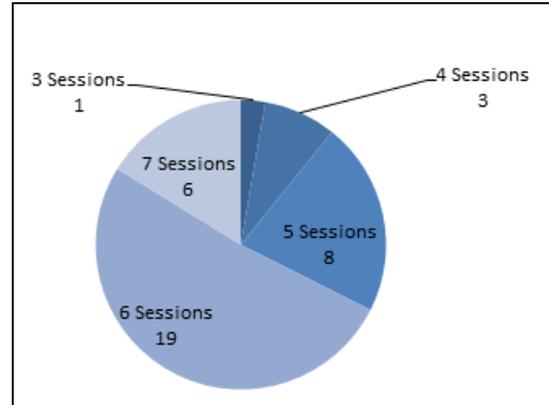


Figure 2
Number of sessions attended by Reading Buddies participants

Reading Test

Participants were given a score on the reading test between -1 (preschool) and 9 (high school). The score is intended to reflect a normal reading level for a student’s grade (e.g., a score of 2 is a second-grade reading level). Half scores could also be given (e.g., 1.5). We subtracted the participants’ pre-test reading scores from their post-test reading scores to determine the change in reading level.

On average, there was a small increase in the participants’ reading levels over the course of the program. The average change in reading test scores was 0.08. The range for the change in reading test scores was from -1.5 to 2. Ten participants showed an increase in reading score, 8 showed a decrease, and 19 showed no change. As Figure 3 shows, few children’s reading levels changed by more than 0.5 in either direction.

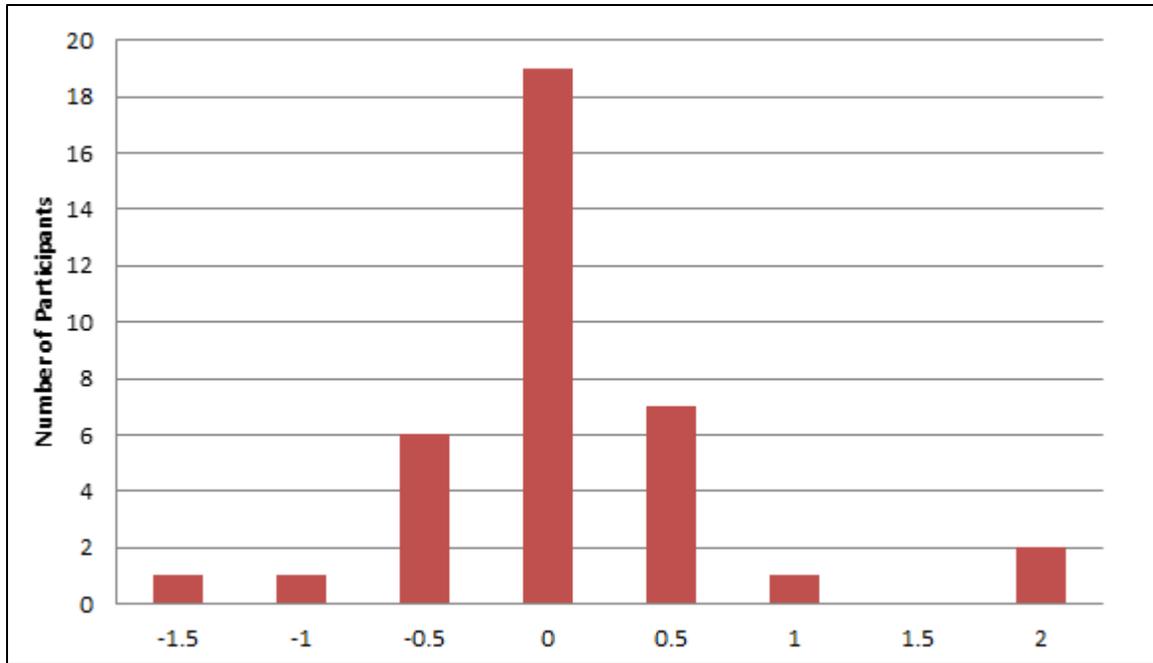


Figure 3
Changes in reading test scores between the first and last sessions of Reading Buddies

The number of sessions may have had an impact on the changes in reading levels, with a correlation coefficient of 0.13. The average change in reading score increased with the number of sessions attended, up to six sessions. See Table 1.

Few children attended fewer than five sessions (over half the study participants came to six sessions), so results here are also not conclusive.

Grade level also appeared to make a difference to changes in reading levels. Between kindergarten and Grade 2, the change in reading level became more positive as the grade level increased. However, the correlation coefficient was not significant at -0.01. While it appears that the program’s positive effects peak around Grade 2, it is important to keep in mind that the majority of the study participants were in first and second grade (only two third-grade students participated in the study).

Table 1
Average Change in Reading Level by Number of Sessions Attended

Number of Sessions Attended	Average Change in Reading Level
3	-0.5
4	-0.17
5	0.06
6	0.18
7	0

The program also had a bigger impact on girls' reading scores than on boys', though overall it did have a small positive impact on both. The average change in score for girls was 0.14 and for boys was 0.03.

Reading Attitudes Survey

All participants were given a reading attitudes score between 10 and 40, with higher scores indicating a more positive attitude towards reading. Contrary to our expectations, the average change in ERAS scores between the first and last sessions was a decrease of 1.17 points. The change in ERAS scores ranged from -14 to 15. Sixteen participants showed an increase in their ERAS score, 19 showed a decrease, and 1 showed no change. While there was a wide range in changes to the ERAS scores, large changes in ERAS scores were uncommon: the majority of participants remained within 5 points of their pre-test score. See Figure 4.

There was no correlation between the number of sessions attended and changes in ERAS scores. There appeared to be a relationship between the grade level of the child and the changes in their attitude toward reading in the 2011 group — the positive effects of the program increased up until the third grade — however, this was not so evident once the 2012 data was added. The correlation coefficient for last completed grade and change in ERAS score was 0.29. As there were only two third-grade students and three kindergarten students who participated in the study, it is difficult to draw any conclusions about these results.

The program had slightly less impact on girls' ERAS scores than on boys', although both sexes show a slight decrease in attitude towards reading over the summer. On average, the female participants' scores decreased by 0.35 points and the male participants' scores decreased by 1.89 points. See Figure 5.

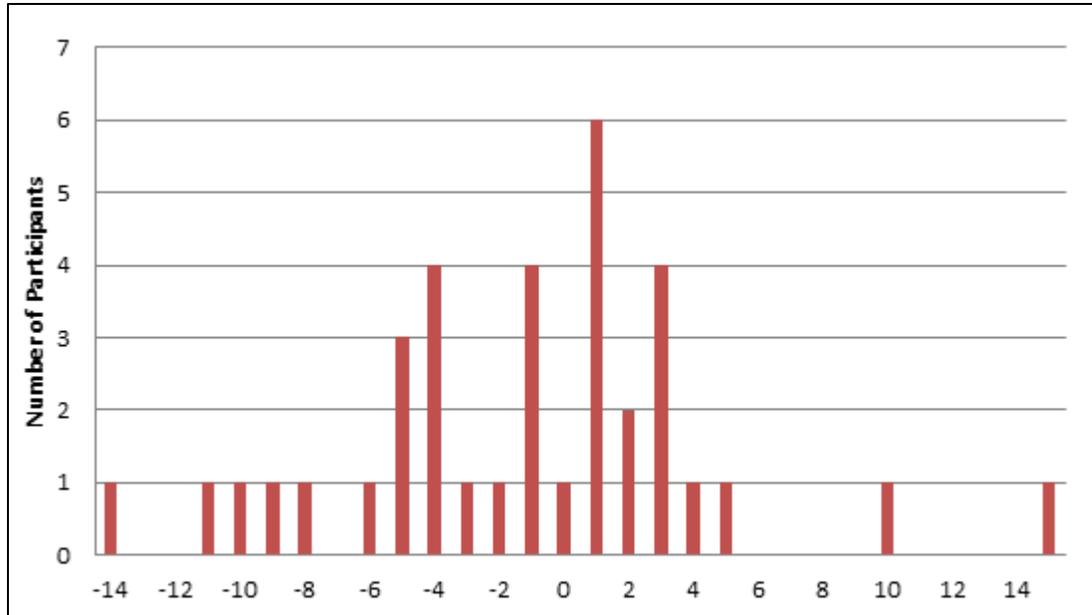


Figure 4
Changes in ERAS scores between the first and last session of Reading Buddies

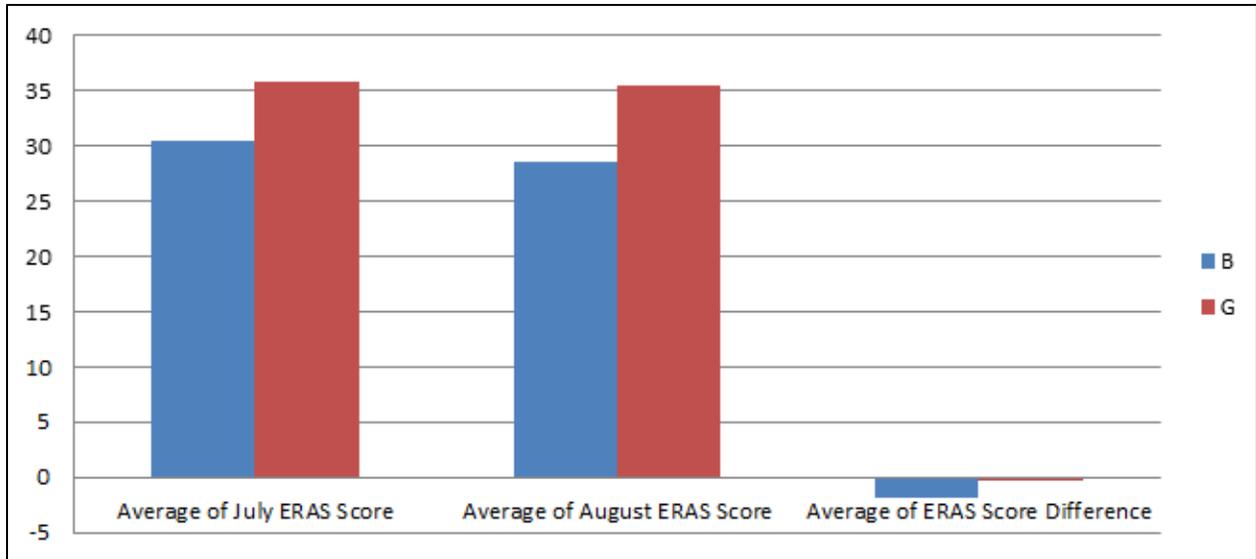


Figure 5
Sex differences between ERAS scores

In general, the boys also had lower raw scores on the ERAS test than the girls. In the pre-test, girls scored an average of 35.88 versus boys' average scores of 30.42. The post-test revealed similar results, with girls scoring 35.53 and boys scoring 28.53.

Discussion

The small number of participants in this study makes drawing any strong conclusions difficult. Our results show some interesting trends with regard to what effect the Reading Buddies program has had on its participants, but it is difficult to declare whether the program was successful or not. On average, the participants showed a slight increase in their reading level over the summer and their attitudes about reading became slightly more negative; however, the changes were very small. Many participants maintained the same reading level and a similar attitude towards reading.

Although the average change in score for the reading test was slightly positive, there were some participants whose reading levels decreased between the pre- and post-test. This may be a symptom of the overall learning loss

that occurs during the summer. Since we have no control group for comparison, it is difficult to evaluate whether our program made a significant difference in combating summer learning loss.

The research demonstrates that the more sessions the children attended, they more likely it was that their reading abilities would increase. This should be emphasized to parents, so that fewer sessions are missed during the summer. It is also possible that a longer program would have a more positive impact (e.g., a program run during the school year). We suspect that the short duration of the program will prohibit it from ever causing large increases in reading ability; however, the number of sessions seems to be sufficient to help maintain reading levels.

For several of the participants, the program had a negative impact on their attitude towards reading. Though it is impossible to say why this was the case, the child's attitude towards participating in the program may have been a factor. Participants may have attended the program at the behest of parents or teachers, rather than of their own volition. Selection bias may also have been a factor, as the program was

marketed towards struggling readers, who may have a more negative attitude towards reading than the general population.

However scant the data may be, this information may point in the direction of potential changes to the program. On average, the boys entering the program had less positive attitudes towards reading than the girls, and also saw less positive effects from the program on both measures.

This is consistent with research indicating that boys generally fall behind girls in reading level as they progress through school (Taylor, 2005). Better results for boys might be achieved if more attention were paid to their particular needs and interests.

There were many factors that could not be measured in this study. The Reading Buddies sessions were loosely structured, and the pairs had choices with regards to how much time they would spend reading, discussing the books, and playing literacy-based games. The impact of supplementary activities versus time spent in one-on-one reading during the program was not measured. The task of keeping a record of the time spent on various activities may have distracted volunteers from their most important task: engaging with their younger partners. Additionally, some activities (e.g., reading and discussion) are so intertwined that measurements of time spent on them were unlikely to be accurate.

The volunteers' skill as reading partners was also not taken into account. Volunteers all received the same training; however, many other factors affected their performance, such as personality, previous experience in similar programs, comfort levels with children, willingness to ask for help, and improvement over the course of the program. Quantifying the volunteers' skill as reading partners was impractical given the number of factors involved.

There were also factors outside of the program that we were unable to measure. As discussed,

voluntary reading is more effective than forced reading at reducing the summer reading gap (Roman et al., 2010). It stands to reason that participants who were motivated to read on their own may have had more success in the program than those who did not read voluntarily. Unfortunately, we had no way of accurately measuring how much voluntary reading participants were doing outside of the program.

During the program, it was casually observed that some of the participants' parents were more enthusiastic about reading than others. This behaviour included making an effort to attend every session, encouraging children to check out books, bringing the family to other reading programs at the library, and reading books themselves while waiting for their children. It would be very interesting to see if this parental influence was related to improvements in reading level and attitudes, however we had no way of determining this during the first two years of the program. For future years, we hope to provide parents with information or training at the start of the program to emphasize the importance of modelling reading behaviour within the family.

Conclusions

This study was undertaken to determine how our library's summer reading mentor program would influence the participants' reading abilities and attitudes about reading.

Our first hypothesis about the Reading Buddies program was supported: on average, the effects of the program on reading skills were positive. However, due to the small number of participants, further study will be needed to confirm these results. It is also clear that, while reading levels may improve slightly during Reading Buddies, maintaining children's reading levels is a more realistic goal for this program.

The second hypothesis, which postulated that the program would lead to an increase in positive attitudes about reading, was not supported by the data gathered. Some participants did demonstrate a higher score on the post-test, as compared to the pre-test, but on average the study showed a small negative impact on attitude towards reading. Due to the small number of participants, further study will be needed to confirm these results.

It appears that Reading Buddies helps to combat summer learning loss, both reading abilities and attitudes; however a study with a control group would provide stronger evidence for this finding.

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