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The effects of book reading over the summer holidays on the reading skills of Year 3 students

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Mary Louise Turner

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ABSTRACT

The existence of an achievement gap between high- and low-performing students is neither unique nor new to New Zealand. Such differences have been documented since the 1930s, and despite decades of reforms and initiatives these disparities persist. Results from the most recent PIRLS study (Chamberlain & Caygill, 2012) showed no narrowing of the margin since the early 2000s, and patterns evident in previous PIRLS studies continue.

A growing body of international research into achievement gaps has focused on summer learning loss and the different impact this has on students from low and high socioeconomic backgrounds. Some argue that even small differences in summer learning amass over the years, and by the end of elementary school the achievement gap is substantially larger than at the beginning (Kim & White, 2011). Further, this cumulative summer learning effect is the primary cause of the widening achievement gap between students from high and low socioeconomic levels (Terzian, Moore, & Hamilton, 2009). Various strategies have been implemented to try to counter this, including summer schools, reading programmes offered by public libraries, and reading books at home.

Although summer learning loss and differential growth in learning when school is closed is well- documented in international studies, little is known about this effect on student achievement in New Zealand. This study addresses the gap in knowledge for the New Zealand context by examining whether encouraging young children to read books over the summer vacation helps stem the summer slide. Using a randomized control group experimental design, a sample of 583 year 3 children in ten schools, seven of them low SES and three of them high SES in South and East Auckland were randomly

assigned to four different groups over the summer break: a books group, a books plus quizzes group, a treatment control group that received math books, and a no-treatment control group that received books only after the study was completed. All groups were pre and post tested with a range of reading measures. The results showed a significant effect of the summer books programme but only for one reading measure while a number of other measures showed no clear effect. The home literacy measures used in the study showed large differences in home literacy resources between high and low SES families such as number of books and access to the computer and to libraries. The study showed that a summer books programme is workable and was much enjoyed by children but that more research is needed to establish the benefits of summer books.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Mary Tonks Turner (July 3rd 1938 – April 22nd 2013)

You are forever in my heart

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