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Free to Read: Growing Elementary Students' Literacy in the Summer

by Allison Nieboer

"It was helpful learning new ways to get reading into our children's lives."

—Free To Read program participant

For many students and families, summer months provide a break from the rigor of school. At the same time, these months are a prime opportunity to support learners' continued reading growth, as seen through the implementation of summer reading programs (e.g., Allington et al., 2010; Kim et al., 2016; White et al., 2014). With intentional programming, teachers and community partners can propel student reading momentum into and through the summer months.

One such program is "Free to Read," which I designed and piloted during the summer of 2021 with the help of colleagues and community members. This program included three important components: free student-selected books, Little Free Libraries (Little Free Library, Ltd., 2021) and one-minute parent videos (the term "parents" is inclusive of parents, caregivers and guardians who care for children). Free to Read provides free books to students, hosts two Little Free Libraries, and produces and distributes free videos to parents. Free to Read is a program designed to encourage the development of a reading life bursting with the freedom of choice and opportunity.

The Free to Read program was implemented at South Elementary, a part of Coopersville Area Public Schools (CAPS). Located on the west side of Michigan, Coopersville is a small, tight-knit community that loves and supports its schools and students. In the 2020-2021 academic year, South Elementary serviced 568 third through fifth grade students. Although this was designed as a summer literacy program, most of the work took place during the school year before it launched.



Allison Nieboer

Free to Read

According to research, many summer literacy programs provide students with free texts. However, the adults in these programs often select texts for children based on the learners' reading skill levels (determined by various assessments) and their interests (described by the child) (Kim et al., 2016; White et al., 2014). While positive effects can be found using this model, there can be a lack of ownership and excitement for students when they are not given the opportunity to choose their own texts. Allington et al. (2010) found that when students were allowed free choice over their summer reading texts, there were significant increases in students' voluntary reading and in their overall reading achievement. Since choice is an important factor when it comes to supporting students' literacy, I designed Free to Read to include as much choice as possible.

Obtaining funds for this program in the spring of 2021 was somewhat of a challenge. Due to the unusual events around the COVID-19 pandemic, the school district had funds that went unused by other programs. The district redirected those unused funds to Free to Read. In addition, I reached out to community partners to secure additional funds. To recognize the local businesses who donated, I printed a sticker for every \$5 donated, identifying each business. The paraprofessional staff of South Elementary placed these stickers onto the free books before students made their choices.

Because of the funding available to support the Free to Read program, we were able to purchase a wide selection of new texts. This included popular fiction and nonfiction texts as well as graphic novels. Books ranged in text complexity to meet students' unique needs and interests. I selected books based on popularity and availability through Scholastic. I wanted to make use of Scholastic's reasonable prices as well as their bonus points. I then compiled a list of books for each grade level and asked colleagues to look them over. They confirmed the lists' accuracy and made additional suggestions.

Popular books such as the *Dog Man* series by Pilkey (2016-2021) and the *Diary of Wimpy Kid* series by Kinney (2007-2021) were chosen because they are well loved by many students. Books were also selected on the basis of being mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors for our readers (Bishop, 1990) (Table 1).

According to Bishop, mirror texts are those stories in which readers see themselves represented. The characters feel familiar and the reader identifies with the characters. Window texts are those that allow the reader to see into the lives of others. With window texts, readers

have the chance to learn about and experience a world that is different from their own. Sliding glass door texts are those in which the reader is able to see into the lives of others, and is able to find ways to step into those new worlds. When a text becomes a sliding glass door for a child today, the reader may change their habits or perceptions based on what they read.

It was intentional to provide print-based copies of these texts. Although there are many online libraries and texts available, these often require digital devices, subscriptions, and WiFi access, all of which can present access challenges for some learners and their families. For this program, participating students had over 70 titles to choose from, including many books belonging to popular series. Students selected their brand-new texts before they left school for the summer. Third grade students chose 5 books, while fourth- and fifth- graders chose 4 books. This was simply due to the increasing costs of books for older students. In the future, we hope to provide 6 or more books for every student.

Setting up the book selection process required some creative thinking. Due to the need for virtual learning, there were two classrooms being used by virtual

Table 1

Free to Read example texts

(NOTE: When viewing this list, keep in mind that each child's unique life experience impacts whether a book is a window, mirror, or sliding glass door (Bishop, 1990) for them).

Windows, Mirrors & Sliding Glass Door Examples		
Windows	Mirrors	Sliding Glass Doors
<i>Ways to Make Sunshine</i> Watson (2020)	<i>Emmie and Friends Series</i> Libenson (2017-2020)	<i>Roll With It</i> Sumner (2019)
<i>City Spies</i> Ponti (2020)	<i>Diary of an Awesome Friendly Kid</i> Kinney (2019)	<i>Allergic</i> Lloyd (2021)
<i>New Kid</i> Craft (2019)	<i>The Baby Sitters Club</i> <i>Graphix</i> Martin (2015-2021)	<i>Women in Science: 50 Fearless Pioneers who Changed the World</i> Ignotofsky (2016)

teachers. Both virtual teachers offered to help set up the event by organizing their empty desks into configurations to help kids browse easily (Figures 1-3).



Figure 1. Free to Read texts, set out for student browsing.

Response to Intervention (RTI) coordinators and para-professionals monitored the rooms during pickup. The RTI program had concluded for the year, making the staff available to help during the school day. Teachers selected a time for book pick up using a simple spreadsheet. The RTI staff shared a list of guidelines before each class entered and helped students find engaging books. Students also were given a flyer that included an explanation of the program's purpose for the parents, a QR code to access Libby (i.e., a free local library app), and a QR code to the Coopersville Public Library's summer reading program. Students were reminded that reading these books counted for the local library's summer reading program.



Figure 2. The original Little Free Library borrowed from the Coopersville Public Library.



Figure 3. A CAPS student helping to stock the Little Free Library for the very first time.

Little Free Libraries

Little Free Libraries (Little Free Library, Ltd., 2021) are small homes for books, often mounted on posts, where anyone can stop by to leave a book and/or take a book home. For those visiting these libraries, they are quick, simple, free, and absent of late fees or hours of operation. And, as patrons take books and leave books, the library texts change.

The Little Free Library is a nonprofit organization that has been “spreading the joy of reading” since 2012 (Little Free Library, Ltd., 2021). Participating in this world-wide initiative requires building or purchasing a library, registering and purchasing a charter sign, and finally, installing the library in the community. Throughout the summer of 2021, South Elementary borrowed a temporary free lending library from the Coopersville Public Library while the permanent libraries were being built (Figure 4).

I visited weekly to ensure it was in good condition and in use. Each time, I saw obvious signs of young patrons.

My intention was that students would trade out some or all of the free books they selected at the end of the school year. However, I noticed that many library patrons left older, used books and that those texts remained around longer. To balance this trend and keep the library going, I routinely added in leftover, brand-new books from the beginning of the program. These high-interest texts were often gone quickly.

In the fall of 2021, two permanent Little Free Libraries (Little Free Library, Ltd., 2021) were built and mounted on our school grounds (Figure 5). Students can now trade books all year long. Both libraries serve as a way of connecting the school with the community. Anyone is welcome to stop by to donate, trade, or grab a book (or two!).

The Free to Read little libraries were built by Mr. Pritchard, a retired CAPS teacher. Mr. Pritchard purchased materials and donated time and energy to hand-crafting the libraries, using images and directions printed from the Little Free Library website (Little Free Library, Ltd., 2021).



Figure 4. Temporary free lending library set up in South Elementary School, courtesy of Coopersville Public Library.

One-Minute Parent Videos

As noted earlier, many summer literacy programs focus on learners. However, we know that students' parents can also benefit from additional resources, especially in summer months. Therefore, parents of South Elementary students received two video tips per week via email during the summer. Designed to be engaging and informative, each video was approximately one minute long and provided one simple tip for supporting elementary learners' literacy. We know a parent's time is limited and precious, so keeping the videos to one-minute allows for easy access and purposeful content.



Figure 5. Scan this QR to see an example of the one minute parent videos. These videos are short and very casual. This video is called “Take Them to the Library...and let them take whatever they want!”
Video Credit: Allison Nieboer

While I wrote the guidelines for the videos and created a number of the videos, a colleague, Allyson Boomsma filmed 8 videos. We used Loom.com as the video platform and, altogether, there were 22 videos shared. Viewership ranged from 9-90 views per video, dropping off significantly near the end of the summer. I had few responses to my parent survey at the conclusion of summer as well. In future programs, I plan to reduce the number of videos to one per week and ask for parent feedback two weeks before school starts. My hypothesis is, reducing the number of videos to

the most salient and ending a little sooner will increase viewership and survey responses.

The video content was based on Cambourne's (1995) Conditions for Learning, specifically: *engagement, immersion, demonstration, approximation* and *practice*. Parents often create these conditions for learning at home naturally, and the purpose of the videos was to validate and enhance these specific conditions.

The videos fell into four main categories, namely: Reading Joy, Reading Identity, Library Use, and Coopersville Events. Tips in the Reading Joy category encouraged parents to engage in activities that bring joy to the reading experience. The Reading Identity videos supported parents and students in understanding who they are as readers. The Library Use videos encouraged use of the local library as well as Little Free Libraries (Little Free Library, Ltd., 2021). Finally, the Coopersville Events videos promoted free or low-cost local events that could be turned into learning opportunities (Table 2).

Based on informal feedback I collected from parents and students, it's clear that the Free to Read program was well-received and we are working to build on its success this academic year. When responding to the end of summer survey, one parent reported, “My child LOVED your outdoor library and visited it often. She was excited to discover a new book and share her favorite book. In addition, she became aware of other ‘little libraries.’ She discovered one up north at a gas station near [our] cottage. She would often ‘book swap’ there as well.”

Conclusion

My intention in creating this program, alongside school and community partners, was to provide our community with free resources that would help students' grow their reading lives, and therefore reading skills, over the summer months. Overall, the program was considered a success, and with more improvements, we hope for even greater success in the future. If you are interested in setting up a similar summer literacy program, see Table 3 for a list of recommendations.

Table 2

Free to Read Video Examples

One Minute Parent Videos Examples			
Video Type	Title	Video Description	Condition(s) for Learning
Joy	Songs are Text	The radio in your car, the songs on your phone, the playlist on Spotify...all of these songs are texts as well. You can use these songs as an entry point to talk to your child about new vocabulary, story-telling, messages and more! (Warning: Be sure the songs you are going to discuss are appropriate before discussing.)	Engagement
Coopersville Events	Talk, talk, talk! Make a Free Event a Learning Opportunity	Free events in the community are great experiences for increasing your child's vocabulary (Cunningham & Zibulski, 2013). Take advantage of the free things around town and make sure to keep talking to your child often throughout the experience. See what new words and phrases you can learn that relate directly to where you are. The Coopersville Historical Museum is a good place to start. It is free, and packed with interesting history to explore together.	Immersion
Identity	The Right to Abandon Books	Hopefully you have had a chance to visit the library at this point, or your child has dug into their free texts. It is important that every reader takes advantage of the right to abandon a book they do not like (Peenac, 2008). As an adult, you likely don't read material you are not interested in, or that you don't like. Let your child know that they don't need to feel pressured to push through a book they truly do not enjoy. Head back to the public library, or the Little Free Library for more choices!	Practice

Source: Nieboer (2021)

Table 3

Recommendations for Creating Your Own Summer Literacy Program

Recommendations	
Funding Sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Apply for grants from your school board, PTA/PTO, district and/or community. ● Ask local businesses. Be sure to give the businesses credit in some way so that they can be recognized for their generosity. This is good for funding and good for the business. Have this plan ready before you approach the businesses. ● Scholastic Publishing has annual warehouse sales. Purchasing books at these can be a huge money saver. ● Ordering from Scholastic online ensures that you can spend bonus points to gain more texts for free.
Little Free Libraries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Visit: https://littlefreelibrary.org/ This website has many resources including kits for purchase that contain everything needed to build a Little Free Library of your own. The site also includes instructions for building a library from scratch. ● Approach local construction companies, and/or local hardware businesses for potential material donations and volunteer builders. ● Look for helpful high-school students to build for you. For example, Eagle Scouts, STEM clubs, future engineering students, students learning at TECH centers, and students looking for volunteer hours. ● Talk to your district administration and/or facilities department to determine a good location for the library early in the process.
Parent Videos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Keep the videos short and simple. ● Send out one video per week (two was too many). ● I used loom.com to record videos. You could also use youtube.com. ● Talk to your tech department about the best way to send out videos to parents. ● If using a teacher or administration email to send out the videos, pre-create each email and use the “schedule send” feature. That way, you can create the videos and emails before summer starts and they will be sent out automatically throughout the summer.

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Allison Nieboer is a 5th grade teacher at Coopersville Public Schools. She is interested in elementary literacy, engaging parents in the learning process, and making use of library resources. She can be reached at knopfa@mail.gvsu.edu.

