A Case Study of Elementary School Parents as Agents for Summer Reading Gain: Fostering a Summer Leap and Holding Steady

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Abstract

This case study examines the role of parents as situationally positioned educators during summer months. It illuminates the processes employed by a public charter school to empower parents to support student learning. The study is an action research case study of one school in a small network of schools. The goal was to determine the effectiveness of the summer project involving parents that had been instituted years prior to replace the formal summer school. The study involved a review of parent survey data, student DRA scores, and interviews with school administrators and teachers. The findings demonstrate that when educators serve as mediators and when schools create a culture of collaboration, parents are able to support students during the summer. In this case, parents as school agents fostered a summer leap by which students gained in reading levels or at the very least maintained their learning from the prior school year. Engaging parents as situationally positioned educators may prevent the beginning of the year reteach.

Key Words: education, parents of color, summer slide, reading, elementary school, home, learning loss, parental involvement, students, engagement

Introduction

As school years conclude, educators are often concerned about whether students' academic gains will be maintained during the summer months. Scholars

who have studied the academic losses that occur during these months often report on the effectiveness of summer schools and structured summer literacy programs (Heyns, 1987; Mikulecky, 1990; Scully, 1955; Zvoch & Stevens, 2015). However, the success of those summer programs, as Borman, Benson, and Overman (2005) argue, depends in part on the dedication of parents. In the absence of a structured summer school program, schools serving low-income students of color can create effective summer educational programs by empowering parents. Duff and Adams (1981) contend that educators cannot assume that parents know how to support students' learning, noting that, often, "parents simply are not perceptive of ways in which they can complement the school's efforts in helping their child" (p. 209). To that end, schools must actively equip parents[1] to be partners in education. The purpose of this paper is to help educators understand how parents, especially during the summer months, can serve to prevent summer loss from occurring. In this case study, we examine a high-performing public charter school on the east coast of the U.S. and its method of building a culture of parent engagement that manifests in parent participation as "summer educators" who support their children and take on the role of primary educator during crucial summer months.

Literature Review

The literature about summer loss spans decades. Cooper, Nye, Charlton, Lindsay, and Greathouse's (1996) meta-analysis of 39 studies from 1906 through 1994 established the existence of summer loss, to the degree of a one-month grade loss on average during the summer. In the analysis of literature, Cooper et al. reported both math and reading losses; they also found that socioeconomic status (SES) had an impact on the amount of academic loss and gain in reading, noting that among social classes, "substantial differences were found in language and reading" (p. 261). Other scholars have substantiated their findings about the prevalence of academic loss over the summer. In fact, Alexander, Entwisle, and Olson (2007) found that summer learning loss compounded over years can lead to dire consequences once students reach high school. They reported that the difference in achievement of low- and high-SES students, particularly during the summer months, have longer term and more damaging effects than many other schooling experiences. According to the study, the summer learning loss experienced during the first five years of elementary school by students from low-SES backgrounds accounted for over half of the achievement gap difference by the time students entered ninth grade. Mikulecky (1990) reported that at-risk youth in some urban cities lost more in the summer months than they had gained during the academic school year.

Lareau (2003) and Posey (2012) explained that engagement of parents from different SES levels is crucial to schooling experiences, and their engagement with children out-of-school similarly effects achievement. In Burkan, Ready, Lee, and LeGerto's (2004) study of kindergarteners transitioning to first grade, they found that social stratification impacts summer learning, with students from higher SES backgrounds demonstrating more gains. Burkan et al., however, suggested that the nature of summer activities themselves do not necessarily account for those differences.

Parents

Parents have been defined as children's first teachers (Livingstone, 1999; Vartuli & Winter, 1989; Wagner & Clayton, 1999; Winter, 1985). In education, their engagement and collaboration has been shown to impact students' academic experiences ranging from reading ability to persistence in college (Cabrera et al., 1999; Duff & Adams, 1981; Hossler & Stage, 1992; Tizard, Schofield, & Hewison, 2011). While parents' high levels of engagement, high levels of educational attainment, and high SES are often assumed to provide more academic support for children (Hart & Risley, 1995), scholars have also shown that poor parents with low levels of educational attainment also contribute greatly to the academic achievement of their children (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Among the key findings in a synthesis of studies related to family, schools, and community connections was that

> families of all cultural backgrounds, education, and income levels encourage their children, talk with them about school, help them plan for higher education, and keep them focused on learning and homework. In other words, all families can, and often do have a positive influence on their children's learning. (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 34)

We argue in this article that parents (specifically poor parents of color) as partners in reading during the summer months can do much to hold the line and even foster improvement in students' reading during the season in which academic loss generally occurs. Parents, when properly equipped, are able to ensure that students maintain their learning, thereby allowing teachers to forge ahead at the beginning of a school year. We outline the processes by which *parents as partners* in crucial summer months remain instrumental in fostering a *summer leap*, thereby preventing the beginning-of-the-year *reteach* in which the majority of instructional time in September and October is spent repairing the "summer slide" or "summer learning loss."

Our driving research questions are as follows:

1. How does a school create a culture of parent engagement for academic achievement during the summer months?

2. In what ways are parents empowered as education partners?
3. How is the work that parents did and their role as situationally positioned educators understood in relation to student achievement?

Methods

This qualitative case study explores the process by which parents were equipped and prepared as summer specialists to maintain and improve students' academics during the summer out-of-school period. A case study, as Eisenhardt (1989) defines it, is "a research strategy which focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings" (p. 534). Though the study is qualitative, we include quantitative student-level data to demonstrate the change in reading scores. In this study, data from the culture-building process, the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) data, and the parent feedback data serve as the basis for the case study analysis.

Study Location

The case study takes place at a Pine Street[2] charter school on the east coast. The school is a K–8 school with 643 scholars attending. It is divided into two campuses: an elementary school campus, and a middle school campus. The racial/ethnic composition of the student body is 17% Asian, 48% African American or African descent, and 35% Hispanic or Latino. English language learners and special education students are 6% and 10.3%, respectively. Over 75% of the student body qualifies for free/reduced lunch. The school is located in an urban environment that is primarily made up of Black and Latino residents. The study focuses on the parents of students from Grades K–3 as the students rise to Grades 1–4, respectively, to understand how parents engaged as situationally positioned educators during the summer months.

Researcher Positionality

The researchers are both educators with a combination of 38 years of experience. One researcher was a principal at Pine Street prior to moving into the role of lead administrator with a charter school management organization. The other researcher is the head of the same organization's research and evaluation department. Our purpose for undertaking the study was two-fold. First, the study was conceptualized as an action research project (Ferrance, 2000) in which one of the researchers, the organization's lead administrator who had abolished traditional summer school several years prior in order to implement the parent-led summer project in its stead, wanted to examine more closely the effectiveness of the summer project. Second, as an organization that has

partnered with local schools to share best practices, we wanted to gauge the strength of the summer project to decide whether to include it as a component of our partnerships and professional development offerings. With these goals in mind, we designed the study in a reflective manner to review longitudinal data from a past year as a starting point and compare it with the newest parents' survey reflections and student-level reading data.

As with many studies, researcher positionality has embedded biases (Bourke, 2014; Kezar, 2002). Bourke (2014) posits that, "it is reasonable to expect that the researcher's beliefs, political stance, cultural background (gender, race, class, socioeconomic status, educational background) are important variables that may affect the research process" (p. 2). Because the study was commissioned by the lead administrator, school-level administrators made efforts to provide requested data fairly rapidly and likely made efforts to be available more quickly than had an outside researcher requested it. In this way, the researchers' positions impacted the timeline. However, the evaluation of survey and student-level data appear to be unaffected by the position of the researchers, as they were data previously collected by classroom teachers.

Data Collection

Data were collected in an effort to evaluate the effectiveness of the summer project at Pine Street School. We used the students' literacy data from June 2014–September 2015 as a point of entry into the case study about staving off summer learning loss. We conducted interviews with teachers and administrators who were instrumental in building parent capacity for supporting and engaging students to complete summer packets. We reviewed parent training materials (power points of presentations to parents, samples of summer projects) and the parent surveys that accompanied the packets. The summer packet was 28 pages and included items such as:

- Letter to the families
- Breakdown of materials needed
- Instructions for summer activities in ELA, math, social studies, physical education, and music
- List of movies and trip option needed for completing the required summer academics
- Scoring rubric outlining the expectations for grading
- Graphic organizers and worksheets for each activity
- Parent survey and first grade student survey

Empowering parents was hypothesized as being crucial to student growth over the summer and to the school's practice of staving off summer learning

loss. To determine the effectiveness of the parent partnership and empowerment, Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) data were collected from the summers of 2014 and 2015. The June data, which signified students' academic levels at the conclusion of the school year, and the September data, which signified the academic level of students entering the school year, were used to determine summer learning loss, leap, or maintenance. There were 252 students with 2014 DRA data and 349 students with 2015 DRA data. The increase in students occurred because during the 2014–15 school year, one class was added to each of the second, third, and fourth grade cohorts.[3]

The DRA data were examined along with parent reflective surveys which documented attitudes toward the summer project. Parent surveys from Summer 2014 ($N = 23$) for one first grade class[4] and parent surveys from Summer 2015 ($N = 190$) were analyzed. We paid specific attention to the comments on the surveys. The written comments in many ways added rich narrative to whether or not the parents felt able to complete the summer projects with their children. We also analyzed the five Likert scale items in which parents reflected upon the project as a whole. See the Appendix for a sample survey.

Data Analysis

Interview data from teachers and administrators were used to understand the process leading to summer projects. The interview data were reviewed to determine which practices were prioritized and how interactions with parents occurred. From this analysis, themes emerged; these themes are reported in the findings section.

The survey data were summarized and also examined for themes to determine the school's culture-building process. Of the 213 surveys, 94 of them included comments written by parents. Survey comments were coded using Saldaña's (2009) two-column review. Initial codes were established in the first pass-through of the survey comments. Subsequently, comments were evaluated and codes that matched previous interviews were correlated, while those that did not were given new codes. The data were categorized as positive, negative, and neutral.

The student DRA data from the June and September periods were compared to determine the reading level change across grades. Additionally, student DRA data were analyzed to determine whether students lost, maintained, or increased reading levels during the summer months.

The Pine Street Summer Project

The Pine Street School employed three practices in order to support parents as education partners during the summer months. The school's teachers

and administrators worked in tandem creating a culture, scaffolding, and empowering parents. It was a joint effort, with the teachers as the professionally trained educators who worked together to create lesson plans that aligned with state standards and school expectations and the parents working as situationally positioned educators who executed the lessons and facilitated students' learning during the summer.

Creating a Culture of Parent Engagement

Parents at Pine Street School literally signed on to participating and being involved in their children's learning when their children were enrolled by signing the contract that indicated that the child would complete assignments, that parents would refrain from scheduling vacations during school days, and that parents would attend all mandatory meetings. While some scholars have argued that parents in choice schools are generally more engaged, other scholars suggest that schools influence parents' roles (Lareau, 2003; Whitaker & Hoover-Dempsey, 2013). At Pine Street, it was the school's invitation and expectation that parents would participate coupled with parents' desire to participate that led to a partnership. That partnership was solidified early on as parents and students participated in Family Chats.

A Family Chat is the introductory meeting that parents and children attend shortly after their families have been selected through the lottery and have agreed to attend the school. The Family Chat ranges from one to three hours and includes an intensive overview of parental and student expectations. Parent/school contracts are completed during the Family Chat; it is viewed as the crucial piece in delineating the importance of parents' roles in the school community including as teaching partners during summer months. In this way, creating a culture of parent involvement is understood as the first step in building a partnership. The parents understood and complied with educators' expectations of summer packet completion as a non-negotiable.

Educator as Mediator

Because teachers are trained to plan lessons, to align curriculum to students' learning levels, and to differentiate instruction for various learner needs, they were recruited by the school administrators to create the summer packets. The teachers were generally "lead teachers" or "grade-level chairs." All participation was voluntary, and those who opted to participate were paid stipends to design the packets.

Teachers could serve as mediators to navigate through the structures outside of the school which some parents might find daunting. Teachers mediated much of the process by finding reading materials, movies, and activities like

museum tours, zoo visits, and aquarium trips. The packets included all contact materials for museums, zoos, and aquariums, with an emphasis on the days and times when entry was free. This provided parents with easy access to the information.

The students' packet also included scissors, binders, markers, and a required reading book for the summer reading assignment. There were multiple graphic organizers to guide the work for each school subject. Also included was a work log for students to log the time they spent working on the assignments for each discipline and a space for parents to sign off. Grade-level appropriate reading materials were included because the school administrator had budgeted these items as non-negotiable to alleviate any financial strain to parents that would impede students from having access. Such a practice of providing students with books was found to help eliminate summer reading setbacks (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2013; McGill-Franzen & Allington, 2008). Teachers also prepared graphic organizers and rubrics that would structure student work and parent expectations. There were, however, parent critiques of the work that teachers had created. This was most evident in parents' negative comments regarding the rigor of the work and noting that the work was too difficult. For the most part, parents were on board after teachers had fielded questions about the project at the summer workshop.

Parents as Educators

Parents are classified in the literature as their child's first teacher (Livingstone, 1999; Wagner & Clayton 1999), but their role as educators does not diminish and must be harnessed by schools. As an educator in Delgado-Gaitan's 1991 study reasoned, a good objective is to "make parents co-teachers with [the school] in order to maximize the students' learning in and out of school" (p. 31). Parents at Pine Street were supported to serve as summer educators and support students by attending an hour-long presentation in which they were given directions about the academic expectations from the teachers at each grade level. During the session, parents were able to ask questions about planning trips, completing worksheets, and gauging the quality of student work. The rubric included as part of the packet was designed to set a precedent for evaluating student work prior to turning it to their teachers. The rubric in Figure 1 below served as a tool for parents to gauge the quality of students' work prior to submitting it in September.

The process of parent empowerment as situationally positioned educators during the summer began with the workshop in which parents were given directions on how to support their children, but the parents were further empowered as they put the work into practice.

1st Grade Entry Project Rubric

You will be graded on the following criteria:

Category	4	3	2	1
Required Elements	You know your stuff! Your project includes all 7 required activities as well as additional information.	You're on the right track! Your project includes all 7 required activities.	You're missing something! Your project includes 3-4 of the activities.	You can do better! Your project includes 2 or fewer activities.
Knowledge Gained	Your information is correct and you use details to show your understanding.	Your information is correct and you use some details to show your understanding.	Your information is somewhat correct and you used few details. You misunderstood some things.	Your information is incorrect and you used no details to show your understanding.
Neatness	Your project was very neat and very well organized, including your handwriting.	Your project was neat and organized, including your handwriting.	Your project was somewhat neat and organized, including your handwriting.	Your project was sloppy and not organized.
Mechanics	Capitalization and punctuation are correct throughout the student's work. All captions are included.	There are 1-3 errors in capitalization or punctuation. Most captions are included.	There are 4-6 errors in capitalization or punctuation. Some captions are included.	There are more than 6 errors in capitalization or punctuation. No captions are included.
Creativity/ Originality	Your project shows a great deal of creativity and effort.	Your project shows creativity and effort.	Your project shows some creativity and effort.	Your project shows little or no creativity and effort.

Figure 1. First grade summer packet rubric.

Findings and Discussion

Parents Empowered Through Assessment

The rubric provided in the packet and the guidelines for the work made it easier for parents to assess areas where students were struggling. Numerous parents offered comments about what they identified as their child's area of academic struggle. In this way, the project made parents more aware of the subject matter that challenged their children. Their first-hand assessment also allowed parents to articulate areas where they wanted help for their children.

> This was very effective. It forces them to read, giving us a chance to identify strengths and weaknesses of our children. (1st grade parent, survey 14)

> Liked the choice of book. Worked well and very flexible. Also gave ways to inspire approaches to thinking about what was happening around him. Activities like Math could have been more comprehensive or accompanied by workbooks to prevent regression. I found the directions easy to understand, but my son needed extra support to follow them accurately. That surprised me. (2nd grade parent, survey 11)

> [My child] has a short attention spam [sic], and it's a little hard to get him to concentrate for a long time without using some force, but we got the job done somehow. His handwriting needs a lot of work, and on that I ask that you please help out. (1st grade parent, survey 2)

In these examples, the parents demonstrated the ways in which they were able to assess their children. Undoubtedly for parents, knowing where their children stand will enable them to ask more specific questions related to the child's learning and performance during the upcoming school year. For the parent who was surprised that her child had difficulty following the directions, it is quite possible that having this knowledge may lead to more pointed conversations with the teacher about strategies to help the child succeed. Similarly, a third grade parent wrote, "My son's motivation while doing this project was basically basic. He lacks imagination; this may be his not so good summer project yet" (3rd grade parent, survey 20). This assessment of her child's imagination will serve as a tool for future conversations with teachers and a lens for assessing other work done by the child.

Parents and Expectations

Parents at Pine Street Charter School also demonstrated their level of empowerment by clarifying their expectations for the projects and making suggestions about how the school and future summer projects could help. Parents who had at least one prior summer project under their belts tended to focus on

content and context. As a result, parents were able to compare rigor and appropriateness of the summer projects across grades.

> We enjoyed the summer packet as a family. We would like to see more variety in our future summer project because we will have a total of three scholars at [the school] soon. We don't want it to feel like a broken record. Thank you. (2nd grade parent, survey 9)

This statement by the parent demonstrates expectations for future summer projects. It also demonstrates the buy-in to summer packets as an expectation.

Another parent whose comment was coded as "positive" shared the comparative nature of project evaluations.

> While the assignments and activities were fun, I feel the rigor could have been enhanced for some subjects. (2nd grade parent, survey 25)

When parents are able to assess the rigor of work given to their children, they can begin to address lowered expectations. Beadle and Handly (1981) found that teachers' expectations about students' (particularly students of color) achievement and ability to attend college was influenced by the teacher's race, gender, and years of experience. In their study, it was teachers' race that determined different expectations for African American students. More recent studies have returned similar teacher beliefs (Ferguson, 2003; Gershenson, Holt, & Papageorge, 2015). Among Gershenson et al.'s (2015) findings were that, "relative to the White reference category, teachers are about 20 percentage points less likely to expect Black and Hispanic students to complete a college degree but 16 percentage points more likely to expect Asians to do so" (p. 9). Considering this finding has corroborated similar studies about teacher's biases, it appears that by giving parents tools to assess their children, parents may then be able have richer conversations with teachers about their children's needs and challenge any biases (Ferguson, 2003).

Parent Comments and Critiques

Not all parents embraced the summer project or their role as summer educators. Some felt the projects were poorly designed, and others felt the project detracted from summer vacation. We found a difference in the type of comments between parents based on school ages. The parent surveys were coded as positive, negative, or neutral on the initial pass-through. Continued pass-throughs allowed us to further classify positive responses into Project Enjoyable or Project Effective categories. The items initially coded as negative were further classified as Negative—Too Difficult (NTD), Negative—Too Time Consuming (NTT), or Negative—Confusing (NC). Samples of quotes that were coded within specific categories are included in the figure below.

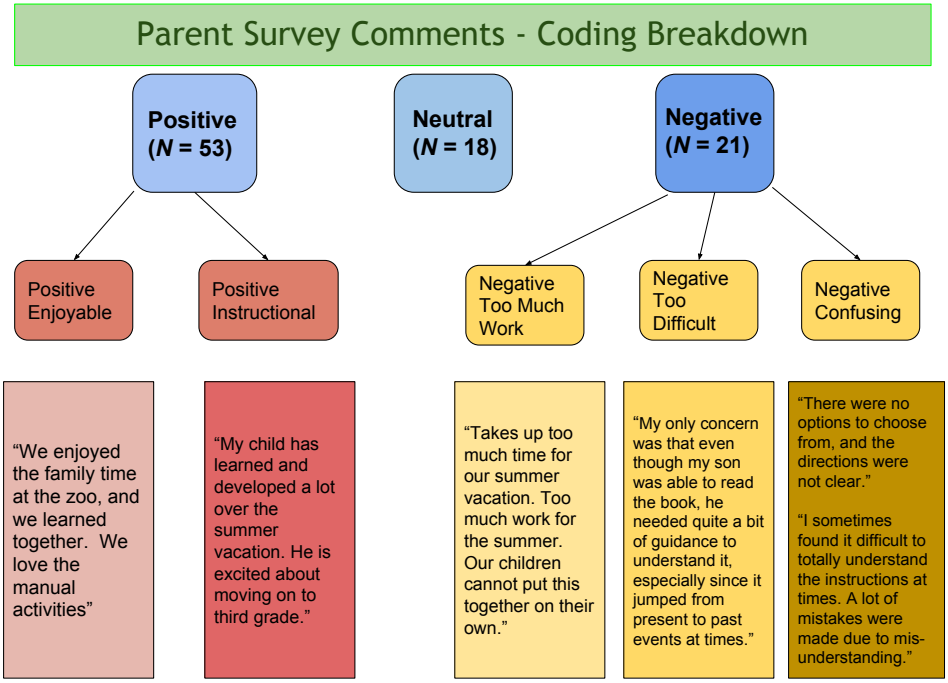

Figure 2. Categorization of parents' summer project survey comments.

Of the 21 negative comments about the summer packet, the majority of the comments were made by first graders' parents. These parents were new to the summer packet. Among comments regarding difficulty, the parents shared, "Some of the ideas could have been a bit simpler for the children. It was difficult to explain what was expected of her for the different projects" (1st grade parent, survey 17). The other comments echoed this sentiment. For many parents, the expectation of an extensive summer project that included trips, reading, writing, and a timesheet of all activities flies in the face of what summer is supposed to be. This is clear by year three. Parents of rising third graders commented most about the time factor. One survey response simply noted, "Too much work" (3rd grade parent, survey 3). A more nuanced explanation was given by a second grader's parent, "Takes up too much time for our 'summer vacation.' Too much work for the summer. Our children cannot put this together on their own, leaving us parents to take time off our busy schedules to do a huge project during summer vacation" (2nd grade parent, survey 28). The parents were heavily involved in the project by design, though the goal was not to overwhelm parents in the way articulated by this parent.

Because many of the negative comments included a positive component, it appeared that parents were willing to do the work, "I understand the need for a

student to keep learning in the summer, but I also feel they need to enjoy their summer, especially if they travel the whole summer. But it's educational; wish it was shorter" (2nd grade parent, survey 3). In the cases where the activities were not as enjoyable, parents had to put in the work of being a strong disciplinarian and setting the project as a priority. For one parent, the work included tough love: "Most of my summer was spent cajoling, threatening, or wiping away tears while working on several parts of this project. Trying to balance the project with family time, excursions, and a second grade activity book covering all subjects became difficult" (2nd grade parent, survey 19). This sacrificial effort by parents and students ultimately led to academic gains for students.

Gauging the Effectiveness of Parents and the Summer Project

This section addresses the remaining research questions:

RQ 2: In what ways are parents empowered as education partners?

RQ 3: How is the work that parents did and their role as situationally positioned educators understood in relation to student achievement?

Parents at Pine Street were expected to be involved in the summer project. The success of students, as teachers and administrators conceptualized the project, depended upon parents to play a role. The degree to which they were involved and the success of that involvement were gauged through parent self-report on surveys and, ultimately, student achievement. To answer these questions, we reviewed the parent surveys and, lastly, reviewed the student Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) data.

Parent Involvement and Student Success

To determine the impact of parents' work with children over the summer on students' achievement, DRA data for Summer 2015 was examined alongside the initial data provided for 2014. Our examination of student data demonstrates consistency across the years, but absent a comparison group, it is difficult to attribute the success to parents' work. Though that is a limitation, the information about students DRA scores provides some insight into how students at Pine Street fared during the two summers. Table 1 details the percentages of students who had a "summer leap," those who maintained their DRA scores during the summer months, those who lost during the summer months, and the students for whom there were no data available.

The analysis of student DRA data demonstrated that the majority of students in each grade either remained at their June reading level or increased during the summer months as evidenced by their early September DRA scores. Students on the whole were scoring at DRA levels above grade level, so those who maintained and increased entered their next grade above level. When

Table 1. Student Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) Levels

	Total Students		DRA Decreased		DRA Maintained		DRA Increased		No Data	
Grade	2014	2015	2014	2015	2014	2015	2014	2015	2014	2015
Rising 1st	84	88	8 (9%)	4 (5%)	59 (70%)	46 (52%)	10 (12%)	26 (52%)	7 (8%)	12 (14%)
Rising 2nd	56	88	3 (5%)	4 (5%)	26 (46%)	47 (53%)	21 (38%)	25 (28%)	6 (11%)	12 (14%)
Rising 3rd	56	89	2 (3%)	26 (29%)	39 (70%)	31 (35%)	11 (19%)	31 (23%)	4 (7%)	11 (12%)
Rising 4th	56	84	13 (23%)	4 (5%)	23 (41%)	39 (46%)	20 (36%)	39 (46%)	0 (0%)	7 (8%)

Note. Some percentages may not add to 100% due to rounding.

examining these data alongside parent responses to the project, evidence of benefits emerge, but the fact of a decrease, maintenance, or increase over the summer is easily obscured by percentages. For example, for rising first grade students, four students had decreased upon entering school in September 2015. Of those scholars, one decreased from 18 to level 10; one from level 14 to 10; one from level 12 to level 10; and one from level 16 to level 12. However, the expected beginning DRA level for first grade is level 4. In this case, all students who experienced a loss over the summer were still above DRA-level expectation upon entering first grade. For rising second graders, four students experienced summer loss. Two of those students had scores decrease from level 30 to level 28, one student decreased from level 20 to level 18, and one student decreased from level 28 to level 20.

Table 2. Distinction of Student DRA Performance in June & September 2015

	Below DRA Level		On DRA Level		Above DRA Level	
Grade	Jun-15	Sep-15	Jun-15	Sep-15	Jun-15	Sep-15
Rising 1	3	4	0	4	71	77
Rising 2	1	3	0	1	72	72
Rising 3	5	17	5	3	71	63
Rising 4	11	21	21	20	45	41

The notion of maintenance can have negative connotation, but for those students far above grade level upon the conclusion of the school year, maintaining that level was welcomed by Pine Street School teachers and administrators. In response to two specific survey items across grades, parents found that the project aided students' academic achievement, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Parents Response Survey

	Did this project meet your child's academic needs?			Did this project involve parents in activities?		
Grade	*n*	M	SD	*n*	M	SD
1st Grade	62	3.55	.78	62	3.54	.78
2nd Grade	63	2.46	.53	62	2.48	.56
3rd Grade 1	45	1.04	.21	45	1.02	.15
3rd Grade 2	14	1.43	.62	14	1.36	.48

The above data demonstrate that parents were overwhelmingly involved in the summer activities and had been acclimated to the culture of high expectations put forth during Family Chats. The first and third grade parents had a higher mean score in relation to whether parents felt they were involved in the activities. The average for whether or not the summer activities met the academic needs of students at Pine Street School were heavily directed toward the response option "exceeds." Further analyses of DRA scores showed the grade levels where students were when beginning summer and beginning the school year and revealed that even in areas where there were decreases in DRA upon returning in September, a large majority of students still were at or above grade level upon entering the 2015–16 school year.

Summary

Parents and students at Pine Street School worked to complete summer projects for their respective grades. Over 96% of students completed the summer work, and significantly more students improved or maintained over the summer than lost in reading levels. In 2015, 82% of the rising first graders, 81% of the rising second graders, 58% of rising third graders, and 86% of rising fourth graders maintained or gained over the summer.

The majority of Pine Street School parents reflected positively on the project as a whole and seemed empowered to critique and make suggestions about the summer project. The increase in summer reading reflects a combination of parents' improved sense of the expectations and their ability to support students as they completed the summer work. Parents suggested more variety, a shorter duration, and more rigor. Their suggestions demonstrated an understanding of where their children were academically and developmentally. Other themes that emerged were the tensions between what parents viewed as a well-earned summer break and the need to do school work. We saw that some parents struggled intently with this. In some cases, we found surveys that teetered between positive and suggestions for less rigor.

Returning to Cooper et al.'s (1996) meta-analysis of summer learning loss that amounts to, on average, one month of school and to Alexander et al.'s (2007) findings that summer learning loss is more damaging to educational outcomes over time, the data related to the summer leap and students' project grades can be said to ameliorate such learning loss. Even in instances of loss in our case study, we looked at the students' starting point to determine the severity of the loss. Most students who did drop only dropped one level.

We contend that in the absence of formal academic activities during the summer months, parents must be mobilized to prevent learning loss. Parents

at Pine Street had committed to taking on the role as situationally positioned educators. This task was made much more palatable because educators served as mediators and did much of the work in creating packets, training parents, and providing resources and materials for the project. This collaborative effort allowed teachers at Pine Street to move forward in September rather than playing catch-up or engaging in the familiar beginning of the year reteach.

The summer project and its components appear to align with the goals of staving off summer loss. The project, which sought to empower parents, provided resources for parents as well as supplies for students. According to McGill-Franzen and Allington (2001), supplying students with books to read over the summer is a starting point for staving off summer learning loss. Additionally, empowering parents and providing them with resources and training contributes to building a school learning community (Epstein & Salinas, 2004).

The surveys from the projects in the study year, though there were a few negative comments, provided valuable information. In the past, these surveys have been used to change the projects. For example, during an earlier summer project, parents were provided with disposable cameras for capturing the images that students were to put in their reports. However, the survey that year reported that the camera images were not high enough quality, and many parents instead opted to use their cellular phones. In the review of the current study's survey data, there were no specific complaints about resources or materials, but the concerns that parents did share mostly demonstrated their commitment to reshaping the project for the better rather than eliminating it.

The findings of this study align with Henderson and Mapp's (2002) beliefs about parents and community as crucial components to learning and achievement. They contend,

> Parent and community involvement that is linked to student learning has a greater effect on achievement than more general forms of involvement. To be effective, the form of involvement should be focused on improving achievement and be designed to engage families and students in developing specific knowledge and skills. (p. 43)

This summer project including all disciplines had the goals of developing knowledge and skill. From the data gleaned from parents and students, such a program should be considered as an opportunity to foster a summer learning leap.

Study Limitations

The case study about Pine Street Charter School was based on the interests of the charter organization to determine the effectiveness of empowering parents over the summer and the impact of the summer project on staving off

student learning loss. Since this is only a case study of one school, we know that it is not generalizable to the population of all urban schools. However, it does offer much to the conversation about practices for home–school partnerships, and it illuminates the salience of parents which some school leaders may not have realized are untapped resources. The parents in this study had signed contracts and were expected to participate and complete the summer packet, but other options were not compared. Therefore, we cannot say for certain that there were no other practices employed by parents during the summer months to account for students' summer gains and maintenance. However, since the results are consistent over two summers, some credence may be attributed to Pine Street parents as summer educators and agents for reading gain.

Implications and Future Studies

This case study about Pine Street parents provides insight for educators wishing to empower parents and foster home–school collaboration during the summer. However, more research about the best way to foster a summer leap and stave off summer learning is needed. While we had data on which students completed the summer project and we received parent reflections, a clearer connection could have been determined about the impact of the parents' work with students if we had obtained summer project grades for all students and been able to correlate that data with whether or not the student lost, maintained, or experienced a summer leap. Additionally, not all teachers required students to hand in a summer work log with the project. Only 13 logs were submitted, with times for working on the project ranging from 574 minutes to 2,790 minutes. These data could have been used to provide an additional variable to determine any possible relationship between work time and DRA improvement during the summer months.

The summer work for parents and students was not easy, and one topic that emerged but that was beyond the scope of this article was bonding between parents and children—the togetherness of learning and the confidence to engage in the work. This bonding was what we consider an unintended consequence of the summer activity. Exploring the bond and how it factored into student achievement is an area for further research as well.

Educators striving to improve student achievement must work in conjunction with parents. Further, when educators serve as mediators by providing clear guidelines about expectations for student work and the type of assistance required of the parents, it creates a more distinctive partnership. With parents and educators working together, students are likely to achieve more.

Endnotes

[1]In this paper, we use "parent" to describe any adult guardian serving in the role of legal caregiver for children.

[2]Pine Street Charter School is a pseudonym. It is also referred to as Pine Street School or Pine Street throughout the article.

[3]As per charter law, those students were admitted via lottery and entered with various levels of reading ability.

[4]Most of the teachers had discarded the surveys after grading and entering the student grades on the summer projects. To avoid this for the 2015 summer surveys, teachers were asked to make copies for the administrator.

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Appendix. Sample Parent Survey

1st Grade Parent Survey

Please provide feedback regarding how effective and productive you felt this project was to your child's retention of material over the summer.

	1	2	3	4
Meeting your child's academic needs				
Directions were clear and easy for you and child to understand				
Helping your child become more responsible for their own learning				
Involved parents in activities				
Creating opportunities for exploration of individual interests				
Appropriate amount of time given to complete project				
Feasible trips and activity choices				
Included activities from all subject areas (math, science, reading, etc.)				

Additional comments: