



## Summer Reading—Magic!

By Linda Williams

Keeping teens actively reading and enjoying it over the summer is an important goal, one that concerns teachers, librarians, and parents alike. However, the trick to successfully engaging teens in summer reading is not necessarily a list or an assignment. The magic word here is *choice*. Linda Williams explains how important the element of choice is in her compelling argument for flexibility in summer reading lists and assignments.

Diane Tuccillo

**S**chool summer reading lists have interested me since the early 1990s. I was a children's librarian struggling to support the local schools by making the books on their summer reading lists available. The children and teens that visited my library hoped to find that magic book that would ease the agony of having to read in the summer.

The magic books were never on the list.

In the late 90s, as a Children's Services Consultant for the State Library, I was able to ask for reading lists from around my state.



I wanted to explore what libraries could do to help, but needed to understand the overall scope of summer reading assignments. Were they the same everywhere? I read all that I could find and searched for research.

During the summer of 2000 I analyzed the contents of 57 high school summer reading lists and wrote an article, "How I Spent My Summer Vacation . . . with School Reading Lists," for *Voice of Youth Advocates (VOYA)*. My study on high school lists continues. As the self-appointed archivist of Connecticut Summer Reading Lists, I collect and file as many of them as I can find each year. I keep wishing that

someone had done this before, so that I could refer to the lists of the 90s or the 80s—or even the 70s when I was in high school myself. As an avid reader in high school, I remember a lot of what I read for school, but have no memory of summer reading requirements. Summer was a time of freedom from school assigned reading, during which I could read whatever I chose.

I believe that "required" summer reading originated in the 80s and has persisted—virtually in the same format—through to the present. Interestingly, there is a dearth of literature discussing or analyzing the practice. All the doom and gloom statistics make it easy to understand the "why" of summer reading. It's the "how" that merits a closer look. In today's increasingly global society and media culture, is the required summer reading list designed in the most efficient way to be a rung on the ladder to developing the higher literacy levels that will be needed in the modern world? Is it working?

The answer to that question would seem to be no, based on the National Assessment of Educational

Progress (NAEP) 2003 Reading Report Card. If only 32% of the nation's eighth graders are "at or above proficient" in their reading skill, and 42% can only read at a very basic level, we need to do everything at our disposal to increase literacy skills. For students to achieve economic and personal success, and be productive citizens, higher and higher levels of literacy will be required.

It would, of course, be folly to think that higher literacy levels rest on student success with summer reading. But it might be the one of the simplest places to make a start. An Associated Press article in *The Detroit News* notes: "Summer homework has increasingly become a popular tool used by teachers to bridge the gap between the end of one school year and the start of another." The article goes on to quote Etta Kralovec, director of teacher education at Pepperdine University in Malibu, Calif. "Homework is school reform on the cheap . . . Political leaders can say we're getting more rigorous with our academic standards because we're assigning more summer homework, but they really don't do anything at all." (Zongker). It is time to take a close look at the practice of required summer reading and assess its successes and failures.

Adolescent literacy has not garnered nearly as much attention or research dollars as early literacy. However, a Washington, D.C. based advocacy organization, The Alliance for Excellent Education, has published a report, *Reading Next*, detailing 15 elements in two categories, *Instruction* and *Infrastructure*, that describes 15 program elements that they believe will

improve the literacy levels of adolescents (Biancarosa). The report is based on the recommendations of a panel of nationally known researchers who met with Carnegie Corporation representatives and the Alliance. Most of the steps require explicit instruction from teachers and will not be elements that can be employed during the summer, except in summer school programs. However, there are three elements in the *Instruction* category that are of particular interest for those who are in charge of designing summer reading requirements.

The "*Motivation and Self-Directed Learning*" element (Biancarosa, 16) focuses on the need "to promote greater student engagement and motivation." The authors stress the need for building into the school day opportunities for students to select their own reading materials and research topics. "Self-regulation is only developed when students are given choices and the instructional support and aids needed to succeed at their chosen tasks." This element also spotlights the importance of promoting "relevancy in what students read and learn." Tuning in to what students consider relevant can help to "redesign instruction so that it is more obviously relevant to students."

The "*Diverse Texts*" element (18) recommends using materials with a wide range of topics (including "a wide variety of culture, linguistic, and demographic groups") and reading levels. "Too often students become frustrated because they are forced to read books that are simply too difficult for them to decode and compre-

hend simultaneously. Learning cannot occur under these conditions. Texts must be below students' frustration level, but must also be interesting; that is, they should be high interest and low readability." The description of this element goes on to say that "high-interest, low-difficulty texts play a significant role in an adolescent literacy program and are critical for fostering the reading skills of struggling readers and *the engagement of all students*" (italics mine).

The "*Technology Component*" element (19), here described as a tool for improving decoding, spelling fluency, and vocabulary development, can also be considered in designing summer reading requirements.

With these three elements in mind, I looked at last year's crop of middle and high school summer reading lists.

## Motivation and Self-Directed Learning

Motivation is a subject near and dear to librarians who work with children and young adults in public libraries. We sometimes envy schools with their "captive audience." Our jobs depend on whether we can be successful at luring kids through our doors and get them checking out books. Developing strategies for getting teens excited about books and reading is what we do best. Finding out what kids really like to read is important, and central to the work we do. Partnering with the public library in your system can be a good way to learn about what students in your school consider relevant. Another excellent resource

for ideas on how to connect kids to the books that will be relevant for them is Teri Lesesne's *Making the Match: The Right Book for the Right Reader at the Right Time, Grades 4-12*.

Most summer reading lists offer lists of titles. Middle and high school lists vary anywhere from 10 to over 500 selections. Students are almost always required to choose 1-3 titles from the list, however long or short. As an interested onlooker I am often baffled when I ponder the question, "Why these *particular* books?" For instance, in a year when there has been an award winning biography, a series book biography of the same subject will appear on a list, begging the question of why the student must read a mediocre biography instead of an award winner?

We just can't resist limiting the choices that young people are allowed to make! Are we afraid that they won't choose "great" or even "good" literature? Some probably won't—at least until they become more accomplished readers. Letting go, however, *could* be the best way to lead them to read more—and maybe even the "classics." Without research, and there is none on reading the canon vs. reading anything else, no one really knows for sure. All we can do is look at what we are doing already and ask, "Is it working?" Peter Kline, in *Why America's Children Can't Think*, says sarcastically "What we have done so far hasn't worked, therefore we must do more of the same." It is difficult to shift to the unknown, but the risk, when we are talking about summer reading, may be worth a try. And there is research that supports giving free

choice a chance. Stephen Krashen has substantially revised his book *The Power of Reading* specifically on "free voluntary reading," to include studies done since 1992. Throughout the book, Krashen makes a powerful case for free choice. And Jimmy Kim at the Harvard Center for Evaluation found that "reading 4 or 5 books over the summer months had an impact on fall reading achievement comparable to attending summer school. Furthermore, *there were no significant differences in achievement based on which type of books children read*" (Fairchild). (Again, the emphasis is mine.)

On summer reading lists, choice is in the mind of the beholder. You may consider it choice if there is a choice of ten titles or fifty or five hundred. I may consider it no choice at all if I am just aching to read J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince* the minute it's released, it's not on the list, and my parents have told me that I must get my summer reading done before I will be allowed to read *Harry Potter*! Or if I have a driving passion for books about robots, and there's nothing like that on the list. The question is, will it motivate me to know that the books I want to read don't count when it comes to school? Does this make a division between "school reading" and "reading" that is helpful? Or is it harmful?

I understand, particularly in the case of the shorter lists, that students are limited because their teachers want to be able to assess their reading and they feel they can only do this if they have read the book. Is it absolutely necessary to assess *summer* reading? I would

argue that the only reason to assess is to be sure that students have read over the summer. Yet, I have talked to teachers who say that even the threat of one zero grade is not enough incentive for some kids to read over the summer.

We make the assumption that they absolutely won't read unless they know they will be assessed. What is the message we give, if it is clear to students that this is our belief? The mere assumption that they will not read if we don't force them into it lends the appearance that *we* actually do not find any other reason for reading than that someone else has told us to read. It may be a leap of faith, but it may be worth the leap. Let's let go—just for the summer—of assessment. Let's forget—just for the summer—No Child Left Behind. Would foregoing this one grade in the grade book mean disaster?

Instead of assessing them outright on their summer reading, what if the only thing kids had to think about in the fall was a class period discussing their summer reading selections? Let's assume this is a session where they don't have to be worried about the grade they will be assigned. The incentive is having something to talk about with their peers.

Here are some real examples from 2004 middle school lists, and how they could be improved considering the "Motivation and Self-Directed Learning" element:

Middle School A offers this advice, along with a list of 10 choices for summer reading: "We hope you choose a book that you will enjoy reading. Read it on the beach, in a hammock, on an airplane, or by a campfire. If you

start a book and don't like it, by all means choose a different title and try again. The secret to being a lifelong reader is to experiment until you find books that you like!" Two choices are offered as assessments. Both seem interesting and connected to "real life." But there is no discussion based around the summer books.

The books selected as the ten choices are good books, of course. However, the letter says that if you don't like one, you can choose again. If being a lifelong reader is experimenting until you find books that you like, I'm afraid you have to open up the choices to include more than ten books. Thousands of new books are published every year. Limiting these 7th and 8th grade students may mean that they don't actually find that magic book that brings them into the kingdom of readers. The students in this school are required to read one book from this list.

An improvement that would bring this "summer homework" assignment more in line with the "finding the right book" element would be to offer the list as a recommended list, but open it up to free choice. Even though the assessment choices are interesting, they include writing requirements. Dropping this one writing assessment in favor of discussion back at school in the fall may help students to see this reading assignment as less painful—and they might just hear about an irresistible book from a peer—and read again!

Middle School B's letter to students says, "We hope you enjoy a summer of reading, relaxation, and interesting activities. The selection of authors . . . should

provide you with plenty of choices as well as challenges. We encourage you to express your ideas about what you read. Your teachers or librarians would be happy to help you choose books that would be most appropriate for you and most suited to your interests . . . [R]ead a minimum of two books of your own choice from the . . . authors listed." The list of authors is extensive, which begs the question, why? Why is the choice limited at all? Again, what is the school afraid the kids will read? What is the message when we separate the good books from the bad books—the good authors from the bad authors?

The assessment is the typical writing assignment. You can't read your book at a campfire for this school, because you are required to take notes. The assessment screams "homework," which is not very motivating.

Middle School C has an attractive list. The list is extensive and includes lots of new titles and series under the heading of "Really Good Books to Try This Summer . . ." The note to the parents says "students may choose to read any other books as long as they have not previously read them and you approve of the titles." Students must read two. The assessment is to make a storyboard.

This is an exciting recommended list and most parents will not add too many limits to their student's reading. The assessment is art, which will be a deterrent to some kids but many will enjoy it too. Still, the current wisdom is that *talking* about books is the best way to motivate.

Most of the middle school

summer reading assignments include a writing component. Writing is absolutely a skill students need to master. However, "summer reading" and writing may not be the best match.

## Diverse Texts

I have seen too many high school students resort to *Spark Notes* to think that it isn't true that students are frustrated by having to read books that are too difficult for them. Many high schools and some middle schools require the reading of canonical literature over the summer when there is no in-class discussion to help with interpretation. The NAEP statistics and the required reading material just don't match up. Teens wanting to meet the summer expectations, but finding the material too difficult, resort to reading plot summaries. It's not that they're cheating, so much as that they are trying so hard to meet the expectation, and simply don't have the skills necessary for the task. Even high-achieving students, like my son who is now a college sophomore, get through high school on *Spark Notes*. Without detracting from the usefulness of plot summaries to help with understanding of a difficult text, I question whether anyone ever would have a life changing experience with a plot summary and become a lifelong reader. Somehow, the idea of being a good reader has gotten mixed up with the idea of being a good reader of "great literature." You *can* be a good reader without being good at analyzing "great literature."

In my first **VOYA** article (2002), I made the observation that high

schools were not including much literature written by authors from minority cultures or women. Only 12.5% of over 2000 titles on 57 lists were written by Asian, Native American, Hispanic, or African American authors, while 24.2% were written by “dead white males.” Female authors wrote 35.6% of the listed titles.

Four years later, looking at the lists presented to Connecticut middle school students, this is an even bigger issue for middle schools. While titles listed on middle school lists are far more current (not many dead authors here), there are very few titles written by authors of the above-mentioned groups (except women). If, as *Reading Next* asserts, “students should be able to find representatives of themselves in the available books, [and] be able to find representatives of others about whom they wish to learn” (Biancarosa, 16), more titles representing other American cultures *must* be found on summer reading lists.

Most summer reading lists offer few, if any, nonfiction titles. Of the 1630 titles included on a sample of 25 middle school summer reading lists from 2004, only 16% were nonfiction titles. High schools are faring better in this regard. Of 1515 titles listed on 25 lists from 2004, 30% were nonfiction titles. Articles and books have been written recently about the particular features of *boys* and literacy. A subject that comes up over and over is the fact that boys, in general, tend to prefer nonfiction. When my sons were in high school, I asked why there was no nonfiction on the summer reading lists.

“We don’t *do* nonfiction in high school English,” was the response. More and more literature is being written about the use of narrative nonfiction in English class. You *can* do nonfiction and you should if you want to engage boys, if not during the school year, then most definitely in the summer.

## Technology Component

There are many ways technology can be used in creating summer reading assignments. In my first article for *VOYA*, I looked at the graphic design of summer lists. There were some exciting lists with splashy designs and formats. I recommended getting the art department involved in designing the list. Using desktop publishing software, the students themselves could be in charge of this aspect of the summer reading list.

A large percentage of Connecticut schools—at least half—are now putting their summer reading lists on their websites. Rather than making it just a .pdf document, students could search out links for each book on the recommended list that would help their peers to choose the right book for them.

Another way to add a technology component with a free choice list is to connect students to the online databases and review sites that adults use to select reading material. In Connecticut, anyone with a library card can access the Gale database “What Do I Read Next?” from home or in his or her libraries and schools. Teaching students how to use this database can help them to find other books like the ones they know they like. There are also many Internet sites,

such as *Teenreads.com*, where teens actually write the reviews. Peer to peer word of mouth seems to be the very best way to increase interest in books. *Teenreads.com* is the next best thing.

## Other Resources

Outside of the three elements I’ve identified in this article, there are other considerations to be made in planning summer reading assignments. My colleague, Susan Cormier, and I designed two brochures, which are available as .pdfs. Entitled “Creating Summer Reading Lists,” there is one for elementary and middle schools, and another for high schools. I wrote a follow-up article for *VOYA*, “‘Summer Belongs in the Hands of the Students’: Celebrating Choice in School Reading Lists” (2003) in which I have identified key factors to include in a letter to students and/or parents, assessments, and booklists. Also of note is the April 2005 issue of *VOYA*, which announces a new award for high school summer reading lists. The award will be based on the criteria listed in the article.

## Conclusion

There are many good things happening with summer reading lists in Connecticut that can be emulated in other communities. Teachers, librarians, administrators, parents, students and other community members can work together to make them even better and more likely to make a difference. *The Center for Summer Learning* at Johns Hopkins University has found that many students experience a learning loss over the summer (Center). Reading practice

is necessary for the development of the literacy skills that will become more and more essential. If we can be successful at stopping summer loss, one step has been taken in the quest for higher literacy skills.

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