

Title of Project: Fighting the Summer Slide: Bridging the Literacy Gap in Children

Country: U.S.

Sponsoring College: University of Florida

Project Leader: Joyce Jiang (U.S., University of Florida)

Two-sentence summary of the goals of your project

The goal of the Book Explorers Summer Reading Program is to provide reading mentorship to underserved 4th and 5th grade students in Gainesville, prevent a potentially significant decrease in reading skills over the summer, and increase a child's confidence in their reading abilities. In addition, we strive to instill a love of reading through virtual interactions with University of Florida volunteers and supplemental activities such as art projects and journal prompts.

Did other fund-raising efforts contribute to your project? What were they?

We did not have any additional fundraising efforts.

How did you come up with the idea for your project?

As students at the University of Florida, we have witnessed the disparities between the East and West side of Gainesville, particularly regarding educational quality. Reflecting on our own elementary school years, we were able to pinpoint what sparked our love for education: reading. We researched more into the educational disparities between low and high income students, and a common trend was the loss of learning over the summer for those from low income backgrounds. With our project, we could try to combat the "summer slide" of reading loss for these students in the hopes that they would feel an increase in confidence when entering the next grade level.

Why do you think the issue your project is responding to exists?

One of the leading causes of unequal reading fluency between children in the U.S. is summer learning loss, commonly called the summer slide. While every child may learn at the same rate during the regular school year, lower income children still tend to fall behind (Alexander et al., 2007). This discouraging trend is due to the long lapse in cognitive stimulation during the summer. Children from higher income families have more resources, such as attending summer reading programs or purchasing books and other learning materials to stave off general academic decline (Alexander et al., 2001). When the fall semester starts, they are more likely to grasp new concepts effectively during the school year (Alexander et al., 2001). To prevent the summer slide for low income children, a quality summer reading program is necessary.

Why did you choose your host site to work in?

Racial inequity in Gainesville and Alachua County as a whole is a problem. In particular, the east side of Gainesville is predominantly populated by low education minorities (University of Florida (UF) BEBR, 2018). A 2018 report on Understanding Racial Inequity in Alachua County identified issues with the educational system as one of the most important factors behind disparities in the county. Many black households in Alachua County reside in neighborhoods zoned for schools earning the lowest proficiency scores (UF BEBR, 2018). Of the 20 public elementary schools in Alachua County, three, located in East Gainesville, earned a D grade in 2019 (Ivanov, 2019). Focus groups with resident minorities recognized education as the primary solution to inequity (UF BEBR, 2018). We decided to address these issues in Gainesville by providing a summer program to students from low-income households in our community.

What was it like to work in your host site?

Our program functioned as a virtual program based at the North Central Florida YMCA. Our University of Florida student volunteers logged onto zoom from their laptops at home, and our elementary school students logged onto tablets at the YMCA summer camp facility. Working in Gainesville, we were fortunate to have access to many community literacy resources such as KidsCount and the University of Florida Literacy Institute (UFLI). KidsCount is a reading program for low income children of a younger age, and they helped us with navigating and conducting a virtual reading program. The University of Florida Literacy Institute, an organization that specializes in helping students improve their reading skills, assisted us in designing a curriculum for our target population. We felt very supported by these community resources while we troubleshooted the logistics of our program. What's more, working in collaboration with the YMCA allowed us to have our students in one place under the supervision of staff to manage behavioral problems.

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Did you feel at any point that the project was not going to work? In what ways?

During our 7-week program we ran into hurdles that made us question if the program was going to fail. The main problem we continuously troubleshooted was internet issues. The YMCA facility had low quality internet service, which proved to be a problem: when students connected to their reading mentors via tablet, these tablets would freeze up and cut out throughout the session. Despite the issues, we were determined to make our program succeed. We bought multiple internet extenders, better quality headphones, and utilized hotspots to ensure that students would have quality tutoring with our volunteers without technology acting as a barrier. To guarantee that our tablets were going to connect properly during the session, our team went to the YMCA early in the morning prior to the start of camp to practice connecting them to zoom and to make sure they had high quality connection to the internet. Even when we thought all of our technology problems were fixed, we were faced with the unpredictable Gainesville weather—one of our sessions was cancelled due to a hurricane and another interrupted by a thunderstorm. Despite the challenges, our volunteers found creative ways to interact with their students to give them the most out of the program each time.

What were the challenges you encountered in communicating with people?

One challenge regarding communication was an unexpected change in leadership at the YMCA. In the months prior to the start of the program, we communicated with the summer camp coordinator via numerous emails and zoom calls. About a month before the start of our program, we learned there was a new summer camp coordinator due to a last minute change. We were initially worried that the new coordinator would not want to continue with our program, but thankfully he was supportive of our program taking place. However, because the new coordinator had not been involved in our initial correspondence, he was not aware of our program days and times, so at the last minute we needed to change our schedule to match the new YMCA schedule. Once the program began, our primary communication problem was getting the YMCA staff to collect waivers from parents for students to participate in the program, and also having the staff get the participating students logged in on time. The YMCA experienced staffing shortages, so it was hard for us to consistently be in contact with whoever was in charge of collecting our participating students and getting them ready on time. Additionally, some of our participating students had their summer camp group changed without our knowledge, so we were not aware that they were going swimming instead of attending our program. Once we resolved this issue, we had all the students who intended to go swimming participate in our first session and not our second session, and as soon as they finished with their lesson they went swimming. Through persistent communication, we were able to have a consistent group of students who enthusiastically attended the reading program.

How do you define peace?

Our definition of peace is a community where members can communicate with each other effectively to accomplish shared goals. In order to do so, community members must possess hope for themselves, as well as others. Because reading levels in early childhood are a reliable predictor of future life outcomes, improving reading literacy will foster this hope, thereby promoting peace within our communities and childrens' lives.

How does or will your project contribute to peace? Short-term? Long-term?

In the short-term, our program will inspire these children to gain an interest in education and build their confidence; this will serve as a long-term guide for their path to a better future.

Please describe the changes created by the project during the summer.

Over the course of the summer, we were able to see students blossom who were not interested in reading, and we are confident that at least a few of our students have a newfound appreciation for reading that they will continue valuing for the rest of their lives.

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Please describe anticipated changes that will continue in the future as a result of this project.

We are planning on making our summer reading program an annual program which will invoke a love of reading for future groups of 4th and 5th graders in Gainesville.

Has your project changed the way you think about the world? How has it changed you?

Creating this summer reading program has changed us for the better as we saw a dream become a reality. We spent months preparing for this program, working from roadblock to roadblock, but in the end, while the program was not perfect and obstacles kept on coming, we were able to do it, and we were able to see the direct impact we had on the students. One girl told us she didn't like reading before, but now she does because of our program. Another student was initially reluctant and reserved, but by the end she was laughing and reading confidently. Another student's mom personally reached out to thank us. We learned that the world is a place where small impacts make big differences, and we are honored to have made a small impact on all of our students.

Was your project impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic? If yes, please describe any impacts you and/or community members engaged in your experienced.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, we conducted our program in a 100% virtual format. Our volunteers were not allowed to engage with the students face to face, and the students needed to log onto a computer and wear headphones for the duration of the session, which proved to be challenging for some students.

How did you advance your projects goals despite these challenges?

We did not let the virtual nature of the program prevent the students and volunteers from having meaningful interactions and learning opportunities. Our program curriculum was unaffected by the pandemic, and it was just presented through a virtual format.

What advice would you give to future PfP grantees given the pandemic-related challenges you experienced?

We would advise future PfP grantees to remain flexible because policies change all the time, and get familiar with how to use technology in case your program needs to go virtual.

If you were able to implement your project remotely, speak to the highlights and challenges of a conducting a remote project

The benefit of a remote project is that the volunteers do not need to drive anywhere to volunteer; they can log on to zoom from their bedroom and connect with the students very easily. The challenge of conducting a remote project is the constant troubleshooting necessary when dealing with technology.

"Navigating the many uncertainties and obstacles of our project taught me to be flexible and decisive in response. With challenges that seemed beyond our capabilities, I learned to persevere, to seek out and collaborate with experts like our community partners, lawyers from Student Legal Services, or advisors from Projects for Peace. Book Explorers taught me to think big and confidently execute plans, to discover new opportunities, and to brush off the initial intimidation I feel when tackling new experiences." -Joyce Jiang (joyce.z.jiang@gmail.com)

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Section II: Photographs

