

Sophia's Choice: Summer Reading

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"I really enjoy reading when there are no strings attached, when there is no book report or assignment I also like the freedom of choosing any book I wish to read. ... I believe that people would read a lot more if they find books they are fascinated by. No pressure of doing well on an assignment, but the pleasure of reading ... I know when I find a book I like. I just can't put it aside. On the other hand, when I am being forced to read, I lose interest instantly." Sophia.

Sophia is the teenage daughter in a family of middle class immigrants from Taiwan. The family arrived in the US when Sophia was in grade six; at the time she had only minimal English, the result of private lessons several days per week for two years.

After entering grade eight, Sophia was tested in English reading on the Idaho Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) each year in the fall and in the spring. At first glance, things don't look good: As shown in table one, Sophia's scores actually drop each year. She dropped 29 percentiles during grade 8, 21 percentiles during grade 9, and another 21 percentiles during grade 10. It seems that Sophia was falling behind her classmates each year, a student who was clearly in trouble.

Table 1: Sophia's Decline During the School Year

acad yr	drop in % ile
gr 8:02-03	29
gr 9:03-04	21
gr 10: 04-05	21

But Sophia was not in trouble. At the start of grade 8, she scored at the 53rd percentile (see table two), a remarkable achievement for someone who had only been in the US for two years. The ISAT is required from grades 2 to 10, but if students achieve scores at the "proficient" level at grade 10, they need not take the test again. Sophia reached this level.

Since 10th grade, Sophia has been a member of the National Honor Society. Last year, she was selected as the outstanding junior year debater, even though it was her first year participating in debate. At the time of this writing, Sophia is in grade 12. She is enrolled, and is doing “A” work in, a college level English class, and achieved a perfect score on the placement examination required for enrollment.

Table 2: Sophia’s Percentile Rankings

acad yr	%ile
gr 8:02-03	53>24
gr 9:03-04	75>54
gr 10: 04-05	68>47

Explaining the Mystery

Table three explains the mystery. It is a re-arrangement of Sophia’s scores to reflect what happened over the summer; each summer, Sophia made substantial gains in reading, making up for what she had lost during the academic year, and then some:

Table 3: Sophia’s Summer Gains

summer	%ile
8-9: (03)	24>75
9-10: (04)	54>68

What did Sophia do over the summer? Did she attend special classes, getting instruction in reading strategies and meta-cognition? Did she work through massive amounts of vocabulary lists? Did she read under a strict regimen, applying grim determination to working through a list of required books, completing book reports and summaries? The answer: None of the above. All she did was read for pleasure: No book reports, no “related reading activities” and all her reading was self-selected.

According to her mother, Sophia read an average of about 50 books per summer. Early favorites were the Nancy Drew and Sweet Valley High series, and Sophia then moved on the Christy Miller series and other books by Francine Pascal, the author of the Sweet Valley series. (Sophia informed us that she was “addicted” to the Christy Miller books; it took her only a week to read the entire series “because I just couldn’t put them down.”)

Her choices thus concur with research showing that series books are enormously popular among young readers (Krashen and Ujiiie 2005) and with arguments that “narrow reading” is a very efficient way of building language competence, because texts are interesting and comprehensible (Krashen 2004).

This is a startling result, but it is not new. Sophia's experience is precisely what was reported by Barbara Heyns in 1975, who showed that the difference in reading development between children from low and middle incomes is because of what happens over the summer: both groups make similar gains during the year, but children from high income families improve over the summer, while those from low-income families either stay the same or get worse. Over the years, the difference builds up until it becomes very large (Entwhistle, Alexander, and Olson 1997).

What Happens Over the Summer?

What happens over the summer that makes such a difference? Access to books and reading. Heyns found that those who live closer to libraries read more, and both Hayns and J. Kim (2005) found that children who read more over the summer make more gains in reading.

Of course, Sophia had an advantage that not all children have: Access to plenty of books.

The public library was the primary source for Sophia's reading. The library had summer reading program and Sophia joined it. After finishing reading a book, she went back to check out another book. She got small prizes such as stickers as rewards but the real reward was the pleasure Sophia received from reading her self-selected books. (See Krashen, 2003, 2005 for a discussion of the lack of research on rewards for reading, as well as possible dangers.) Sophia even took the city bus with her younger brother to the public library when her mother was too busy with work to take her to the library.

Sophia is also part of a family that supports education and encourages her to read. Summer reading, encouraged by her mother, had been a regular part of Sophia's life for years. Sophia had been a pleasure reader in Mandarin before she and her family moved to the United States, and lived in a print-rich environment in Taiwan. After arriving in the US, however, she had no access to new books in Mandarin, and had to learn to read in English to continue her pleasure reading habit. She profited, thus, from "de facto bilingual education," a good background in her first language, and her case confirms that the pleasure reading habit transfers across languages (Kim and Cho, 2005).

Sophia's case is a good example of using resources from public libraries. The summer reading program at the public library not only motivated Sophia to read, but the wide variety of reading books also attracted her to visit again and again. Not all children are so lucky, but the situation can be improved. More and better public libraries are, of course, part of the solution, especially for children who have no other sources of books.

Summer reading programs, those that emphasize lots of interesting reading and gentle encouragement, have also been shown to be extremely effective. Shin (2001) reported that her sixth graders grew a spectacular 1.3 years on the Nelson-Denny reading comprehension test, from grade level 4.0 to grade 5.4, and equaled comparisons (six months' gain) in a traditional program in vocabulary growth after only 5 and a half weeks in a program that included two hours of free reading each day and regular trips to the school library.

The Effect of “School Work” on Reading

Rather than just work on improving book access during the summer, however, in order to allow all children to improve as Sophia did, we must ask what happens during the school year. It appears that much of what happens works against reading development.

Sophia's mother provides insight into the situation: During the school year, Sophia is so busy with “school work” that she has hardly any free time to read. Sophia's mother, in fact, joked that it might be a good idea to keep her daughter at home during the school year in order to increase her improvement on standardized tests of reading.

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