

Fighting the Summer Slide: Bridging the Literacy Gap in Children
Gainesville, Florida, USA
University of Florida
Project Leader: Joyce Jiang

Program Dates: June 21st, 2021-July 30th, 2021

Proposal Narrative:

1) Context:

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 tend to fall behind (Alexander et al., 2007). This discouraging trend is due to the long lapse in cognitive stimulation during the summer; thus, a quality summer reading program is necessary. Our proposed program focuses on children who will enter 4th and 5th grade in the fall because they are not a focus of current programs. Reading levels in children as early as third grade can predict their life outcomes. A student not reading at his or her grade level by third grade is four times as likely to not graduate high school on time, and a high school dropout is 63 times more likely than a college graduate to be imprisoned (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012; Sum et al., 2009).

Our definition of peace is a community where members can communicate with each other effectively to accomplish 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 children's lives. In the short-term, our program will inspire these children to gain an interest in education and build their confidence and communication skills; this will serve as a long-term guide for their path to a better future.

Racial inequity in Gainesville, and Alachua County as a whole, is a problem. In particular, the east side of Gainesville and regions on the Southwest side of Gainesville and along Tower Road are predominantly populated by minorities with low education levels (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 minority residents recognized education as the primary solution to inequity (UF BEBR, 2018). They saw education as offering their children the best chance for success and noted that some schools are not getting the resources they need to provide a well-rounded education (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.

Our goal is to have a free virtual summer reading program for 30 fourth and fifth graders from low income households in Gainesville, Florida. We want to help these students improve their literacy skills through guided reading, journal prompts, art projects, and literacy lessons created in conjunction with the University of Florida Literacy Institute (UFLI).

2) The Solution:

We will partner with Kids Count, an organization that provides after school tutoring to students from kindergarten to third grade in Gainesville's low performing elementary schools. Because Kids Count does not currently provide tutoring for students in 4th or 5th grade or a summer program, we hope to implement one for this age group to fight the summer slide. We are also partnering with UFLI to create a curriculum geared towards increasing literacy skills in 4th and 5th grade students. UFLI has experience with summer programming, virtual instruction materials, and volunteer tutor training.

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Phase I: From February to May, we will recruit students from low income families by advertising to schools and afterschool programs in East Gainesville. While registering for the program, the students' parents or guardians will fill out a survey asking if they have reliable access to technology and internet, the child's reading level, and favorite books. Based on survey responses, we will gauge our audience before putting together a lesson plan. We will then develop a curriculum in coordination with UFLI and Kids Count.

Phase II: From March to mid-June, we will collaborate with UFLI to train volunteers to work in small group discussions with students. We will also purchase the program supplies.

Phase III: The program will run for six weeks, beginning on June 21st and ending on July 30th. Students will meet for forty minutes, three times a week. Past studies of successful summer reading programs show that key educational elements include guided reading with smaller groups tailored to the needs of individual students and emphasizing phonetic skills (Johnston et al., 2015; Zvoch & Stevens, 2012). In addition to these elements, group discussions, journal prompts, and art projects will inspire students and encourage critical thinking. Lastly, a rewards system will be used to motivate students to stay focused, share their art and writing assignments, and exhibit good behavior.

Phase IV: We will evaluate our experience and propose improvements to make future programs more efficient and effective.

3) Assessment and Sustainability

This grant will help establish a long-lasting program to increase literacy for children from low-income households in the Gainesville community. We plan to establish an annual summer reading program, either folded into UFLI's existing structure or by creating an UF student run organization. The goal is to develop a yearly summer reading program with the support of UFLI and Kids Count, using supplies purchased with the grant in the hope that future children may reap the program's long-term benefits. Our program will inspire a love for reading and learning, encourage peace of mind and hope for a brighter. Rather than watching children slip down the summer slide, we will help them climb the ladder of opportunity. To us, success means seeing the children in our program gain an enthusiasm for learning and improve their skills relating to reading, critical thinking, and social interaction, thereby increasing their performance in school.

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