Transforming Summer Literacy:
How Innovative Programs Cultivate a Passion for Reading and Stronger Student Connections

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the perspectives of children enrolled in a six-week summer literacy program and its impact on their attitudes toward books and reading. Specifically, the research aimed to explore how culturally relevant pedagogy and engaging literacy activities influenced children's motivation to read by addressing the following two research questions: What are participants' perspectives on the benefits of a summer literacy program? and What are participants' perspectives on reading and books after immersion in a summer literacy program? The sample consisted of 21 children in grades 1–6. Using a mixed-methods approach, including surveys and open-ended questions, the study investigated participants' perceptions of the program's content, structure, and the quality of relationships with instructors and peers. The research focused on how the use of culturally relevant literature and enrichment activities shaped children's reading experiences and the role of child-staff relationships in fostering engagement. Outcomes revealed that the program's diverse literature, coupled with interactive activities, significantly contributed to cultivating a passion for reading. A supportive, nontraditional learning environment and positive relationships between children and staff further enhanced participants' perceptions of reading and learning. This study highlights the effectiveness of innovative summer literacy programs in fostering a love for reading and strengthening student engagement.

keywords: summer literacy program, children's literacy, multicultural literature, culturally relevant pedagogy, children's perspectives, child–teacher relationships

1. Introduction

Reading is considered one of life's essential skills; thus, it is not shocking that parents, teachers, schools, and policymakers have long made reading success a priority. What is bewildering is why billions of dollars, dozens of government programs, and hundreds of research-based strategies have yet, even in the 21st century, achieved what everyone seems to want: all children reading proficiently by third grade. To the contrary, the instrument used by the United States to gauge reading success, the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) exam, indicated reading scores of fourth graders in 2022 were three points lower than in 2019 (U.S. Department of Education, 2022), and while 66% of fourth graders scored at or above the NAEP basic level, that left 34% of fourth graders with scores below the basic level. Average reading scores on the 2019 NAEP exam for fourth graders declined in 17 states (Green & Goldstein, 2019), and in the past decade, the so-called achievement gap between the highest and lowest performing students has widened in fourth grade reading (Barshay, 2019). Stakeholders have argued about the root causes of the disappointing scores in reading. Meanwhile, our study

aimed to evaluate, through the lens of enrolled children's perspectives rather than test scores, the effectiveness of a summer literacy program that took a different approach to reading enhancement.

The summer program we share about is unique from other summer literacy programs due to its strong focus on cultural enrichment, social justice, and community engagement, combined with literacy skill development. Lessons incorporate multicultural children's literature that aims to empower children by helping them connect with their cultural identity and history. Through lessons, conversations, and activities that incorporate social justice education, students are encouraged to think critically about societal issues and equipping them with the tools to become advocates for change. The program goes beyond literacy, addressing the holistic development of children, including their social, emotional, and physical well-being. Community members and businesses are partners and share in the financial support and implementation of enrichment opportunities each week. The program we write about served 40 children for six weeks, providing them with a structured and consistent learning environment during the summer months at no cost while school was not in session. The summer literacy program described in this study is grounded in culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), which emphasizes the need for instruction that reflects students' cultural backgrounds and fosters a sense of belonging. In our program, the culture provided an environment where children felt respected, valued, and connected, all tenants of what Connor (2016) describes as engagement theory, which drive student motivation and agency in their learning.

The unique approach of this summer literacy program, with its emphasis on cultural relevance, social justice, and holistic child development, invites a deeper exploration of how these elements interact with established research on children's attitudes toward reading, student engagement, and learning environments. To better understand the impact and effectiveness of such nontraditional educational models, reviewing the existing literature on critical pedagogy, the role of culturally relevant teaching in fostering engagement, and the broader landscape of summer learning programs is necessary. The literature review that follows provides context for evaluating the outcomes of the program through the perspectives of the children it served.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Children's Attitudes Toward Books and Reading

Research demonstrates that elementary and middle school-aged children's positive attitudes toward books and reading grow when they are given access to a wide variety of books and autonomy in their reading choices. When children are allowed to select what they read and when to read it, their motivation and enjoyment of reading increase, compared to when they are required to read pre-selected, mandatory texts (Capotosto, 2019; Fraumeni-McBride, 2017; Pak & Weseley, 2012). This autonomy fosters a sense of ownership over their reading experiences, which can lead to the development of lifelong reading habits and a deeper connection to literature.

For English language learners (ELLs), the availability of diverse and culturally relevant texts has been shown to boost self-efficacy, which in turn motivates them to engage more fully in reading (Wilfong, 2015). This benefit extends to all students, as access to diverse texts that reflect their own experiences and introduce them to different cultures and perspectives can enhance both engagement and empathy, making reading a more meaningful and enriching experience.

Moreover, research highlights a significant disparity in reading motivation among children from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who often report a lack of enthusiasm for reading (Biyik et al., 2017). However, when these children—particularly those disadvantaged by poverty—are provided with access to a variety of books, especially those that align with their interests, their excitement and motivation toward reading significantly increase (Capotosto, 2019; Luo et al., 2020). These findings underscore the critical need for educational systems to prioritize providing diverse, student-selected reading materials to foster a positive reading culture.

Despite the clear benefits, implementing these strategies poses challenges, particularly in underfunded schools and communities where access to a diverse range of books may be limited. Addressing these challenges requires targeted efforts to ensure that all children, regardless of their background, have the opportunity to develop a love for reading through access to books that resonate with their lives and those of others outside their communities and classrooms.

2.2. Student Engagement

Research consistently demonstrates that when children feel connected, respected, and valued within their classrooms, they are more likely to be actively engaged in their learning (Connor, 2016). Student engagement, defined as "the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation they have to learn and progress in their education" (Great Schools Partnership, 2016, para. 1), is a critical factor in fostering academic success and positive behavioral outcomes. High levels of engagement are associated with increased academic achievement, better classroom behavior, and stronger interpersonal relationships.

Moreover, the roles of teacher support is vital in enhancing student engagement and satisfaction in school. Studies have shown that positive teacher-student relationships are particularly crucial for students who are ethnically diverse or academically at-risk, as these relationships can serve as a buffer against the challenges these students may face (Split et al., 2012). The quality and depth of these relationships—marked by trust, respect, and mutual understanding—are instrumental in fostering a learning environment where students feel motivated to participate, ask questions, and take on leadership roles (Connor, 2016).

Conversely, a lack of engagement can lead to significant negative outcomes. Disengaged students often experience boredom and a lack of mental stimulation, which diminishes their motivation to excel academically (Macklem, 2015). These students are less likely to take initiative or advocate for themselves, leading to a cycle of disengagement and underperformance. The maintenance of positive intergenerational relationships, such as those between teachers and students, is crucial, as they have been linked to higher academic achievement and overall student well-being (Crosnoe et al., 2004). Thus, fostering student engagement through strong, supportive relationships is not just beneficial but essential for creating a thriving educational environment where all students can succeed.

2.3. Learning Environments

Creating learning environments where all children feel valued, safe, and successful is critical to their academic achievement and overall well-being. The literature emphasized the importance of cultivating spaces that are not only conducive to learning but also responsive to the diverse needs of students. Research highlights that classroom environments offering flexibility, such as the choice of seating, play a significant role in fostering purposeful learning opportunities and enhancing intrinsic motivation among elementary and middle school students

(Cole et al., 2021; Kokko & Hirsto, 2021; Roberts et al., 2018). These informal learning environments, which move beyond traditional, rigid classroom settings, are shown to heighten students' interest in learning and extend their engagement beyond the confines of the classroom.

Informal learning environments, such as those that incorporate flexible seating or outdoor learning spaces, provide students with the autonomy to make choices that align with their individual learning styles. This autonomy empowers students to select productive workspaces, fostering a sense of agency that stimulates their learning and promotes academic success (Cole et al., 2021; Kokko & Hirsto, 2021). Moreover, by enabling students to take initiative in their learning process, these environments cultivate essential skills such as self-regulation, critical thinking, and problem-solving.

The significance of these learning environments extends beyond academic outcomes; they are integral in nurturing students' motivation and engagement in their education. By offering meaningful choices and encouraging self-directed learning, these environments help students develop a deeper understanding of their learning preferences, ultimately leading to a more personalized and effective educational experience. The literature clearly demonstrates that creating dynamic and inclusive learning environments is essential for fostering both academic success and personal growth, providing students with the tools they need to thrive in and out of the classroom.

2.4. Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

For decades, researchers have been providing evidence that culturally relevant pedagogy has positive impacts on student learning across multiple disciplines, populations, achievement levels, and grade levels (e.g., Au's 1980 study of reading achievement among Hawaiian children; Moll et al.'s 1992 study of cultural funds of knowledge in Arizona; Ladson-Billings's 1994 study of successful African American teachers). In the 21st century, researchers have continued to provide evidence of the significance of culturally relevant pedagogy. Byrd (2005) found that "elements of culturally relevant teaching were significantly associated with academic outcomes and ethnic-racial identity development" (p. 1) in a survey of 315 sixth through 12th grade diverse students from across the United States. Byrd concluded that culturally relevant teaching works and is connected to better academic outcomes. Additionally, Walker's (2019) mixed-methods study sought to understand the impact of culturally relevant pedagogy on literacy achievement of low-SES, eighth-grade Black males. Findings over the academic year indicated a positive impact and significant difference between pretest and posttest scores on the Measurement of Academic Progress reading assessment after teaching using a culturally relevant teaching model. Dee and Penner (2019) found that a program for African American males that embraced culturally relevant pedagogy, along with other initiatives, significantly reduced dropouts. An earlier study by the same authors (2017) found that the use of culturally relevant pedagogy, in the form of an ethnic studies curriculum, "increased ninth-grade attendance by 21 percentage points, GPA by 1.4 grade points, and credits earned by 23" (p. 127). The authors concluded that, when implemented with fidelity, culturally responsive pedagogy effectively supports at-risk students.

Studies that focused on cultural relevance in the teaching of younger children have similarly found positive results. A study of culturally based supplemental mathematics curriculum (Math in a Cultural Context) significantly improved the mathematics achievement of Native Alaskan and other mixed-ethnicity second graders, as well as both rural and urban students (Kisker et al., 2012). And a study of the relationship between culturally relevant texts and reading proficiency found that third grade English language learners had greater reading proficiency and comprehension when they read a story "they identified as being more culturally relevant"

(Ebe, 2010, p. 208). A study by Isbell et al. (2020) found that children in a summer program, troubled by vandalism to their playground, were motivated through literature and peer discussions to bring about change in their own community, action which fostered literacy engagement and development. Culturally relevant pedagogy is inclusive, opening "spaces where young people can see themselves, be themselves, and know they belong" (Krauss, 2021, p. 141). The inclusive and culturally relevant classroom mirrors children's "cultures and identities in everything from assignments and activities, to the pictures they see on the walls and characters they read about in books" (Krauss, 2021, p. 141).

2.5. Summer Learning Programs

The importance of summer learning programs is extensively documented, particularly in relation to mitigating the well-documented phenomenon of summer learning loss. Research consistently shows that students experience significant setbacks in academic progress during the summer months, with this loss being disproportionately greater for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (Alexander et al., 2007; Downey et al., 2004; McCombs et al., 2011; Pedersen, 2012). This seasonal regression not only exacerbates the achievement gap but also poses long-term challenges to educational equity.

However, summer learning programs have shown to be an effective countermeasure, providing critical opportunities to sustain and even enhance students' academic skills during the break. A comprehensive meta-analysis of 93 summer programs underscores the potential of these initiatives to significantly reduce or even reverse summer learning loss across all grade levels (Cooper et al., 2000). The success of these programs lies in their ability to offer targeted interventions tailored to the specific needs of students, whether through the distribution of books and educational materials (Albee et al., 2019; Allington et al., 2010; Guryan et al., 2015; Kim, 2006) or through more structured, intensive summer intervention programs that provide in-depth, personalized instruction (Christodoulou et al., 2017; Contesse et al., 2021; Graham et al., 2011; McDaniel et al., 2017).

Moreover, the effectiveness of these programs is not limited to academic outcomes. Structured summer learning initiatives often contribute to the holistic development of students, fostering social, emotional, and cognitive growth. By maintaining academic engagement during the summer months, these programs help students retain literacy knowledge and skills, preparing them to re-enter the school year with confidence and competence. As the literature suggests, well-designed summer learning programs are an indispensable tool in the fight against educational inequity, offering a bridge to continued academic achievement and long-term success of children.

2.6. Summary of the Literature

The literature review reveals the critical role of summer learning programs in addressing the phenomenon of summer learning loss, particularly among students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. Research consistently demonstrates that these students experience significant setbacks in academic progress during the summer months, exacerbating the achievement gap. However, summer learning programs have shown to be effective in mitigating this loss.

Many summer programs achieve success through targeted interventions that cater to the specific needs of students, whether by distributing educational materials or offering intensive, personalized instruction. Beyond academic retention, these initiatives also contribute to the holistic development of students, promoting social, emotional, and cognitive growth. By

keeping students academically engaged during the summer, these programs play a vital role in ensuring that students return to school ready to succeed, making them an effective strategy in the pursuit of educational equity.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in culturally relevant pedagogy, as proposed by Ladson-Billings (1995), and engagement theory, which emphasizes the importance of connectedness, respect, and a sense of belonging for student engagement (Connor, 2016). Culturally relevant pedagogy focuses on utilizing students' perspectives and cultural competencies in learning opportunities and utilizing a curriculum that is relatable and motivating. This framework aligns with the goals of the summer literacy program, which sought to engage children through literature that reflects their own experiences and encourages critical thinking about societal issues. Engagement theory, which ties student motivation to positive relationships and meaningful learning experiences, also informs this study's analysis of the program's effectiveness.

4. Methodology

Quantitative data from the survey were analyzed using descriptive statistics, as the purpose of this study was exploratory, and hence, no hypothesis testing was necessary. The analysis focused on understanding participants' responses to scaled and yes/no survey items related to their attitudes toward reading and the summer program. Since this study did not seek to generalize beyond the sample used, findings were interpreted within the context of the specific population and program setting.

For the qualitative data, an inductive analysis approach was employed to explore participants' open-ended responses about their experiences in the program. The researchers used open coding to review children's responses to capture key concepts and ideas expressed by the participants. Researchers identified recurring words, phrases, and ideas that emerged from the data without a predefined coding framework. Once codes were established, the researchers then met together to group the codes together into categories that represented recurring themes in the data. The final themes were organized into a thematic table which allowed for a clearer understanding of the relationships between different themes that supported the research questions.

4.1. Program Background and Context

The setting for this program was a 6-week summer literacy program operated in June and July of 2021 on a university campus in a small southern town. Participants in the program were 40 rising first through sixth graders; parents of 40 program enrollees self-identified their children as qualifying for the U.S. government's free or reduced-price lunch subsidy program.

Literacy program enrollees spent 3 hours each morning immersed in structured, student-centered literacy instruction built around high-quality, multicultural children's literature. Program instructors were college students trained in the use of culturally relevant pedagogy, literacy development, and trauma-informed practices. Ladson-Billings (1995), in proposing "a theory of culturally focused pedagogy," explained that culturally relevant teachers:

- maintain fluid student-teacher relationships,
- demonstrate a connectedness with all of the students,
- develop a community of learners, [and]
- encourage students to learn collaboratively and be responsible for one another. (p. 480)

All the above were part of instructors' training in the summer literacy program we facilitated and subsequently impacted the design of their daily lessons that incorporated the use of multicultural texts and the perspectives of students' experiences in daily instruction.

Program instructors also were trained in the use of research-based strategies for literacy engagement. Engagement theory (Connor, 2016) posits that children are more motivated to learn when they feel connected to their learning environment and experience respect from their teachers. These tenants were key in shaping the positive relationships built between students and instructors, which our study found to be integral to participants' enjoyment of reading and learning. For example, after reading a story about a child who was bullied, enrollees discussed alternate outcomes to the story, made text-to-self connections, proposed solutions to various conflicts that arose in the story, and created anti-bullying posters that were displayed around their learning environment. These and similar activities with other books bolstered reading comprehension while also providing authentic, character-building learning experiences. Word walls helped to familiarize program enrollees with new vocabulary, and reading circles helped to build a learning community in which the children were encouraged to openly share thoughts and feelings about what they were reading. Enrollees' meaning-making activities often included art and theater, and their creative and colorful literacy responses were displayed around the classrooms and down the hallways to share their learning with others in the program. Each day included read alouds, as well as 15 minutes of independent, self-selected reading time. Class size was limited to 10 children per instructor.

In the afternoons, program enrollees were engaged in 2 hours of structured yet flexible learning activities that ranged from STEM robotics to cycling safety, from bowling to painting, and from swimming to picking strawberries. The summer learning program's environment balanced the need for clear routines and goals with the adaptability to meet children's needs and interests. The structure provided through a well-planned curriculum, with set times for literacy lessons, independent reading, and enrichment activities that ensured choice, discussion, and student leadership opportunities. Within each classroom, staff tailored activities based on students' responses, interests, and cultural backgrounds. This approach encouraged creativity and exploration, enabling attendees to engage deeply with the material while still benefiting from the stability and support of a predictable routine. This environment allowed children to feel both guided and empowered, fostering a love for learning and reading in a way that personally resonated. Through various activities on campus and during off-campus field trips, program attendees had opportunities for active and experiential learning. To maximize children's exposure and engagement with multiple learning opportunities and experiences, afternoon activities were formatted as stations, with children rotating from one activity to the next. In a single afternoon, students might create a cooperative art mural, ride bicycles, and participate in a drum circle. On another day, they might find themselves programming robots, playing musical instruments, or learning new sports with college athletes.

Family and community engagement were also part of the literacy program. Morning read alouds and afternoon activities provided children opportunities for networking with a variety of volunteers, such as police officers, nurses, artists, librarians, engineers, local principals, college professors, and community leaders. Weekly meals and activities for families brought instructors, volunteers, enrollees, and their siblings and caregivers together for a time of community.

During our program, we sought to learn more about what children perceived to be the most valuable parts of the program. To do so, we collected quantitative and qualitative information to better understand the participants' perspectives on reading and the summer literacy program. Using IRB-approved data, our team plans to use the information we collected to help other

programs like ours better understand some aspects that help make summer literacy programming effective.

4.2. Participants

From the total program population, 21 children (52.5%) agreed to complete the 21-item survey, which included seven yes/no prompts related to reading or books and 10 scaled response items about the literacy program. There were also three open-ended questions about the program. From these conversations with children enrolled in the program, we wanted to learn (i) *participants' perspectives on reading after immersion in a summer literacy program,* and (ii) *participants' perspectives on their experiences in the summer literacy program.*

4.3. Research Instrument

The survey was developed by the researchers based on the objectives of the program as well as using extant literature. To ensure content validity, the development process was iterative, with drafts of the instrument being shared among the researchers as well as a survey research methods expert. To ensure that the instrument was suitable for younger children, emojis were used as response choices for Likert-scale options. Summer program staff also reviewed the final instrument to ensure the language was age appropriate.

The survey was administered to participants individually during the final week of the program by three researchers, all of whom had daily interactions with participants. To make the survey accessible to all participants, regardless of reading ability, the researchers read the survey questions aloud; participants were invited to either circle, point to, or orally share their answers, which were recorded on the survey form by the researchers. Demographic information (gender, ethnicity, grade level, attendance, etc.) for each participant was uploaded to an Excel spreadsheet, then matched to the corresponding survey before surveys were de-identified and assigned a number for blind analysis. Survey data were then uploaded for each corresponding participant.

4.4. Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the survey were analyzed using descriptive statistics, and hence no hypothesis testing was necessary. The researchers did not seek to make any generalizations beyond the sample used. Qualitative data were analyzed using inductive analysis to look for themes across participant feedback about the program. Researchers used open coding to identify concepts and categories to further analyze. Researchers then created a table where they condensed the codes into developing themes using the data to further develop each category.

4.5. Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations of the study include its geographic area, the ages of participants, and the type of literacy program studied. Study findings may not be generalized to other geographic regions, to other age groups, or to other reading programs, specifically non-summer programs and differently structured programs.

There are limitations within the parameters of the study that reduce the generalizability of the study. First, the small sample size (n=21) provides perspectives from a very few students within a single summer literacy program in a rural region in the Southern United States. While the study provides valuable insights into participants' perspectives, the perspectives may be different if more children were surveyed from other summer programs similar to ours. Second,

there is a potential for social desirability bias in the children's responses (Krumpal, 2011). Because the participants were students of the program staff facilitating the interviews, the children's responses may have been altered to impress the staff or describe their outlook with the program favorably. Future research may frame questions in hypothetical scenarios or use other indirect questioning strategies to reduce social desirability bias when completing educational research with children.

5. Results

Our research team wanted to better understand the components of the summer literacy program that children felt to be beneficial. We also wanted to better understand their perspectives on reading and books after immersion in our summer literacy program. Most participants expressed a motivation to attend the program because it was exciting, and they believed it would have a positive impact on their school experience. Participants indicated that instructors supported the enjoyment of reading and learning, and that peer relationships also contributed to positive experiences during the summer program. Many participants reported an enjoyment of reading in both home and school environments and indicated they had access to books at home.

Study findings are reported in three sections. The first section reports the results of survey items 1–7, which addressed participants' perspectives towards reading, books, and school. The second section reports the findings of survey items 8–17, which asked about participant perspectives towards the literacy program. The third section discusses the findings of the qualitative portion of the study, which asked participants to share their likes and dislikes about the program.

5.1. Participants' Perspectives on Reading, Learning, and School

Seven survey items sought participant perspectives on reading, books, and school. Survey items 1–4 focused on participants' reading experiences both at home and at school. Survey items 5 and 6 asked about participants' perspectives towards reading, and survey item 7 asked about participants' attitude toward school.

Findings indicated that a majority of participants had positive reading experiences at home and at school. In response to survey item 1, most participants (62%) indicated they "read at home with my family," while six participants (29%) indicated they did not read at home, and two participants left the answer blank. Most participants (76%) indicated they enjoy reading at home, with five participants (24%) indicating they did not enjoy reading at home.

A slightly smaller number, but still many participants (52%), indicated on survey item 3 that they enjoy reading at school, with nine participants (43%) indicating they did not enjoy reading at school. And 76% of participants answered *yes* to the prompt "I enjoy reading for fun" for survey item 4. The remaining five participants (24%) said they did not enjoy reading for fun.

Survey items 5 and 6 both asked about books. A majority of participants (91%), in response to item 5, indicated they "like to receive books as gifts," with only two participants (9%) answering *no* to the prompt. Responses to item 6 indicated that most participants (86%) "had lots of books to read at home" before attending the summer program. Three participants (14%) indicated they did not have lots of books at home.

The final prompt in the survey's first section indicated that a majority of the study participants (71%) indicated they "like to go to school," while four participants (19%) answered *no* and two participants left that item blank.

These findings align with engagement theory, which emphasizes that students' motivation to learn is driven by their sense of connection to the learning environment and the people within it (Connor, 2016). The positive relationships between participants and instructors were instrumental in fostering an environment where participants felt supported in their literacy development.

5.2. Participants' Perspectives on the Summer Literacy Program

Ten survey items (prompts 8–17) sought scaled responses (agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree) to prompts about the literacy program. Items 8, 15, and 17 asked participants about their feelings related to the literacy program and its afternoon activities; item 9 asked participants to consider whether their literacy program would influence schooling; items 12 and 14 asked about literacy program learning experiences; items 10 and 13 asked participants about their teachers' impact; item 11 asked about socialization during the program; and item 16 asked for participants' feelings about books they received.

A large majority of participants in the study responded positively to survey items that gauged their perspectives on the summer literacy program. In response to item 8, the majority of participants (95%) agreed that the literacy program was exciting, with only one participant choosing *neither agree nor disagree*. Responding to item 15, most study participants (81%) said they wanted to attend the summer program, with four participants (19%) choosing *neither agree nor disagree*. Responding to item 17, most participants (95%) agreed that the afternoon activities were exciting, with one participant choosing *neither agree nor disagree*.

A large majority of participants stated the program, particularly afternoon activities, was exciting and encouraged their daily attendance. This finding was supported by attendance data which showed that 19 of the 21 participants in the study missed 0–4 days, with 10 of the 21 having perfect attendance over the duration of the 6-week program.

Most participants also indicated they expected their participation in the summer literacy program to have a positive impact on their school experience. In response to item 9, 12 participants (57%) indicated they would do well in school because of the summer program, while eight participants (38%) indicated they neither agreed nor disagreed, and one participant (5%) indicated they disagreed.

Participant responses to learning experiences also were mostly positive. In response to survey item 12, a majority of participants (95%) indicated they learned during the summer program "that I can make a difference," with one participant (5%) indicating they neither agreed nor disagreed. In response to survey item 14, most participants (80%) said they learned during the summer program that they can "take action to solve a problem," with four participants choosing *neither agree nor disagree.* Study findings indicated that benefits of the program could extend beyond summer. A majority of participants believed they would do well in school because of program participation, and most indicated that what they learned could lead to their becoming future changemakers and problem solvers.

Findings concerning participants' perspectives about program instructors' impact on reading and learning also were positive; 95% of the participants said instructors helped them like reading, and 80% reported their instructors helped them like learning in general. The majority of participants also indicated that the program's instructors contributed to their positive feelings about reading and learning. Most participants (95%) indicated on survey item 10 that program instructors "helped me to like reading," with one participant choosing *neither agree nor disagree.* Most participants (80%) indicated on survey item 13 that program instructors "helped me to like learning," with three participants choosing *neither agree nor disagree* and one

choosing *disagree*. All the survey participants said they agreed with the prompt: "I like the books I got to take home."

Study findings indicated most participants had a positive socialization experience in the summer program. In response to survey item 11, 86% of participants expressed that they "made new friends" during the program, with three participants indicating they neither agreed nor disagreed.

The use of culturally relevant pedagogy in the program was critical in helping children see themselves reflected in the materials they read, fostering both engagement and a deeper connection to reading (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Engagement theory underscores the importance of students feeling valued and connected in their learning environments, and participants' positive responses to both the literacy activities and the relationships with instructors demonstrate the success of the approach taken during our summer literacy program (Connor, 2016).

5.2.1. Participants' Program Likes and Dislikes

Survey items 18–20 were open-ended questions that gave participants an opportunity to express what they liked and disliked about the summer literacy program. Item 18 prompted the participant to "tell me one thing you like" about the literacy program. Item 19 prompted the participant to "tell me another thing you really like" about the program. Findings for these two questions were combined for analysis. The final prompt, survey item 20, asked participants to share "anything you didn't like" about the program.

Findings from survey items 18 and 19 indicated that participants had a broad range of program "likes," but overwhelmingly their responses related to afternoon cultural enrichment activities. Participants mentioned field trips, including specific ones (bowling, trampoline park); STEM activities (STEM Center, robots); art activities (painting); sports and exercise (volleyball, soccer, biking, swimming), and simply "play." The second largest category involved responses related to literacy. Participants mentioned reading, books, and specific reading activities (e.g., Drop Everything and Read (DEAR) time, book circles). Some participants mentioned the reading curriculum by name, and they also mentioned the morning opening activity that involved read-alouds, chants, and motivational singing. After cultural enrichment and literacy activities, responses most often related to relationships—friends and teachers. Participants mentioned making new friends, talking with friends, and playing with friends. A few participants mentioned teachers: one said, "Teachers are so calm here," and another said, "Teachers [are] fun to talk to."

6. Discussion

This study explored perspectives of 21 children's interactions with books, reading, and programming during a 6-week summer literacy experience. Our study asked: *What are participants' perspectives on the benefits of a summer literacy program?* and *What are participants' perspectives on reading and books after immersion in a summer literacy program?*

Our findings were consistent with existing research pertaining to learning environments, relationships, and student engagement. Research has shown that students who had favorable opinions about reading (Capotosto, 2019) and learning (Cole et al., 2021; Kokko & Hirsto, 2021; Luo et al., 2020; Roberts et al., 2018) and students who were taught using criteria of culturally relevant pedagogy (Au, 1980; Byrd, 2005; Dee & Penner, 2017/2019; Ebe, 2010; Kisker et al., 2012; Moll et al., 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Walker, 2019) may be more

intrinsically motivated to achieve. In the context of our summer program, children were engaged with reading, which may be the result of positive instructor-participant relationships, strong peer communities, meaningful learning opportunities, a variety of engaging texts and activities, or some combination of these program characteristics. We learned that the participants responded positively to structured, yet flexible learning environments, that they had positive experiences during reading times, and that they valued relationships with both peers and instructors.

Our findings highlight the importance of the inclusion of culturally relevant pedagogy and engagement theory in creating successful summer literacy programs that aim to encourage and foster a love for reading and learning among elementary students. By incorporating multicultural texts that reflect students' cultural backgrounds and fostering strong, supportive relationships between instructors and participants, the program was able to create a learning environment where children felt both valued and engaged (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Connor, 2016). This information suggests that programs with similar goals to ours should consider the materials used as well as relationship quality within the program.

7. Implications for Practice

Today's classrooms privilege the teaching of separate reading skills, followed by standardized tests, to measure reading achievement. However, many students fall short of reading proficiency, despite the implementation of high-quality instructional materials by licensed, experienced teachers. Based on our conversations with students, we believe that the teaching of reading is more complex and must move beyond skills teaching and testing. For those planning summer literacy programs, we offer the following insight, as we feel the following were foundational to the success of our program.

While the instructors in our program were taught to use proven teaching strategies, they also were encouraged to build meaningful rapport with each child, through kindness, caring, and empathy. We believe the depth and authenticity of these relationships were significant in program outcomes. In many of the conversations we had with program participants, interactions with the caring staff were their favorite parts of their day. As one student stated, "I like coming back to [program name] every day because the teachers are nice and don't yell at you. They're really nice."

Many traditional elementary classrooms environments are structured in ways that expect students to sit in desks, listen as teachers lecture, and complete worksheets to assess learning. Our program model used a different approach. In classrooms, meaningful book talks extended children's understandings of the texts they read together. Children sat in circles and engaged in active conversations surrounding the texts they read. The questions extended beyond basic comprehension questions, but rather, focused on deeper meaning making and how they might apply what they were learning in personal or community settings. We believe that the shared governance in decision making and expectation-setting gave participants the confidence they needed to become leaders. The lessons, free of worksheets, skill and drill, and teacher-centered learning created an engaging learning environment where children had a multitude of positive experiences with books and literacy, many for the first time since becoming readers.

Rudine Simms Bishop, a renowned literacy leader, famously coined the idea that books can serve as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. This metaphor highlights the power of literature to reflect a reader's own experiences, offers a glimpse into the lives of others, and provides opportunities to step into new worlds. In the program's daily literacy lessons and on bookshelves for independent reading time, hundreds of books that embody this vision, featuring diverse characters representing a wide range of nationalities, abilities, and religions,

were available for children to read. These books offer the very opportunities Bishop spoke of—allowing readers to see themselves, understand others, and explore the broader world.

The availability of such relevant and diverse literature plays a crucial role in motivating children to read, helping them connect with stories that resonate with their own lives while also expanding their understanding of different experiences. Through these stories, readers can also learn how young people like themselves can become changemakers in the world, drawing inspiration from historical figures like Malala Yousafzai. Access to these books not only enriches their reading experience but also helps them see the potential for their own impact on the world.

The importance of diverse and relevant literature in shaping young readers' perspectives aligns perfectly with the words of Mary McLeod Bethune, who famously said, "The whole world opened to me when I learned to read" (Barrett, 2020). While we believe increasing fluency rates and comprehension scores are important, we believe it is more important (for purposes of our program) to ignite a passion surrounding the pleasure of reading. To create a joy around reading means that children will grow up to be adults who are lifelong readers. And while the content of structured lessons during the program incorporated state literacy standards, the lessons were taught using culturally relevant pedagogy, immersing participants in relevant and engaging books through student-centered activities, including participant reading choice. We believe these rich environments—relationships, engaging activities, and relevant books—are necessary if children are to find the joy in reading and learning.

Ultimately, we want to create summer reading programs that provide spaces for children who have not been successful using a traditional school model. For us, that has meant disrupting the norm, allowing kids who have rarely experienced school success to thrive, giving the children leadership opportunities, ample time to read books they choose, to work with young adults who are compassionate, and foster children's desire to be lifelong readers and thinkers.

8. Conclusions

Our pilot study focused on the perspectives of rising first through sixth graders' experiences during a 6-week summer literacy program and their perspectives toward books and reading. Participants who completed interviews with the research team responded positively to the program, to books, and to reading, and they indicated in their responses that instructor–participant relationships were impactful. While our study's aim was not to make research-based claims, we do feel that a strong research design is needed to determine if summer literacy programs improve reading proficiency, as well as their impact on student reading performance when they return to school in the fall. Given that diverse children's literature and culturally relevant pedagogy were key components of our summer program, future research might explore whether these components can similarly motivate students in a public-school classroom and whether students' motivation and interest in reading are sustained beyond summer programs. Finally, all the components that we have found to be successful in the summer program have for decades been championed in the literature, yet with limited implementation in public school classrooms. In fact, reading instruction in many schools in the 21st century has shifted more to emphasis on isolated skills, such as phonics and vocabulary, and more recently to the use of scripted curricula. More studies are needed to examine why proven components of successful programs, such as the use of culturally relevant pedagogy, are discounted or overlooked in public school teaching and learning. Future research should aim to build on the findings of our study by expanding the sample size to include children in summer programs across the nation as well as those from varied socioeconomic backgrounds. Longitudinal studies could explore the long-term impact of summer programs like ours for

long-term love of reading and learning, attitudes toward summer learning opportunities, and importance of child-teacher relationships. Further, research could examine whether culturally relevant pedagogical approaches can be successfully integrated into public school settings in tandem with district mandated curricula.

Without the future adjustments, the program already stands out among summer literacy programs for its powerful blend of cultural enrichment, social justice education, and community engagement. Unlike traditional programs that focus solely on academics, this program serves as a model for other programs as a empowers children by immersing them in a curriculum rooted in heritages of minority populations and social justice themes. This unique approach not only enhances literacy skills but also fosters a deep sense of cultural identity and social awareness. By involving families, local organizations, and young adult mentors, this summer program created a vibrant, supportive community where children built positive relationships with staff and develop a love for reading.

This holistic and culturally relevant model has a profound impact on its attendees, particularly in areas like book access, summer learning, and the development of positive relationships. With its high-intensity, 6-week program, the summer program not only curtails summer learning loss but also nurtures a love of reading through increased access to culturally relevant books. Additionally, the close-knit, intergenerational relationships between children and their mentors foster a nurturing environment that enhances both academic and personal growth. This transformative experience goes beyond the classroom, leaving a lasting imprint on the lives of the children it serves.

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