Submitted by Pamela J. Farris, Distinguished Teaching Professor Emeritus, Northern Illinois University, Mary E. Gardner, Director, Reading Clinic, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Northern Illinois University and Teri Reed, Title I Reading Teacher, Oregon Elementary School, Oregon, Illinois

Pamela J. Farris

10222 E Hickory Ridge Dr

Rochelle, IL 61068

pamelafarris@comcast.net

815 751 5771 (cell)

megardner2@comcast.net

815-734-4063

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Community- Based Programs in Rural Settings

Abstract: Rural settings have unique literacy problems due to the small and spread out population. This chapter will establish a definition of rural areas discussing general demographics. Sections to be included are the need for community-based support for teachers, at-risk students, and parents with emphasis on the support of school and community.

Community- Based Programs in Rural Settings

This chapter is devoted to the challenges of reading instruction in rural communities. Starting with a historical perspective and moving to current issues and problems, sections included are the need for community-based support for teachers, at-risk students, and parents with emphasis on the support of school and community. The chapter will explore the support roles played by faith-based organizations and service organizations in programming that meets the needs of these populations. It will examine programs aimed to promote and support early literacy, summer reading loss, and increased access to books in general. Concerns of rural areas such as limited library access, small schools, and pockets of low-income housing are addressed.

Historical and Philosophical Background

Some of the greatest intellectuals America has produced—Thomas Jefferson, Henry David Thoreau, and Ralph Waldo Emerson—wrote of the importance of a strong and healthy rural society. They viewed the urban world as a place of noise, commotion, and filth all wrapped together and being purposeless (Shi, 1985). In short, Jefferson, Thoreau, and Emerson believed that only in the countryside, would life take on the best qualities so that humankind would flourish.

In the mid-1800s, Frances Parker took up the call for rural education. Taking his first teaching position at age sixteen, Parker taught 75 students in a village school in New Hampshire. At age twenty-one, he accepted a principal position in Carrolton, Illinois. After serving in the Civil War as a Colonel for the 4th New Hampshire Volunteer Military, Parker headed a normal school in Ohio. Desiring to learn new methods of pedagogy, he traveled to Europe to examine theories put forth by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Friedrick Frobel, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, and Johann Friedrich Herbart. Upon his return, Parker became superintendent of Quincy Schools in Quincy, Massachusetts, he developed his ideas into the Quincy Method, a progressive approach to instruction (Farris & Riemann, 2014). Later John Dewey would deem Parker as the founder of the progressive education movement (Farris & Werderich, 2019).

Parker believed that farm life benefitted children's learning as they gained first-hand knowledge of science and applied math skills to daily tasks such as building chicken houses or measuring feed mixtures for cattle. He asserted that students benefit most from reading what interests them which in turn activates prior background knowledge. Parker supported balanced instruction—phonics, word families, onsets and rimes—for word recognition. The integration of

the language arts—reading, writing, listening, and speaking—was advocated by Parker as was process writing as a methodology. Writing across the curriculum on topics of their own interest and enjoyment would help to develop writing skills. Thus writing should be natural and authentic based on the student's own experiences (Farris & Werderich, 2016).

President Theodore Roosevelt wrote that "No nation has ever achieved permanent greatness unless this well-being was based on the well-being of the farmer class" (The Report of the Commission on Country Life, 1909, p. 41). Roosevelt believed rural America was the "backbone of our nation's efficiency," but that rural life risked being left behind in the modern American emerging in the first decade of the 20th century." Roosevelt created the Commission on Country Life. Headed by Liberty Hyde Bailey of Cornell University in upstate New York, both Bailey and Roosevelt regarded rural citizens as the "middle wheel" or "balance force" of American society. They viewed the growing migration from rural areas to the cities as putting society at risk due to creating an imbalance. Flight by young rural citizens to urban areas highlighted the modern amenities of electricity, indoor plumbing, telephones, and highways and hard surface roads. The Commission suggested a number of solutions, many of which were adopted. The ideas included rural free mail delivery, an agricultural extension program to respond to farmers' questions, improvement of rural roads, and the reform of rural schools.

Bailey urged schools to abandon the traditional recitation pedagogy and adopt progressive education advocated by Parker and John Dewey. Rural schooling should be centered around the study of nature. Bailey was convinced that if rural students could appreciate the beauty and wonder offered by the countryside, they would not be interested in moving away to big cities as adults. Thus, students would remain in rural areas and the "balance force" would continue to keep society stabilized. Due to the small size of rural schools, the Country Life

Commission advocated the merging of schools into a central school which was fought by rural communities. This led to the decline of the Country Life movement and still remains a volatile issue in rural communities today as people resist closing local schools and merging with nearby communities.

During the latter twentieth century, writer and farmer Wendell Berry of Kentucky became an advocate for a rural lifestyle. If rural dwellers are to have thriving communities, then, according to Berry, the equilibrium with nature must be re-established and sustainable agriculture mu0st be embraced. People must care for and respect one another and cherish the land upon which they reside. They must also care more closely for the ways they know one another, the rituals of their daily lives, and their knowledge of the local environment (Berry, 1990).

As presently constituted, rural education fails to meet this standard, according to Berry. In his view, rural citizens are taught to be producers and consumers. Instead they should be taught that the measure of production must be how well it can be sustained over time. Sustainable production is necessary for establishing and nurturing the real community--the common cultural ground--of rural communities. If this does not occur, the American national economy will continue to destroy rural society and the natural environment (Berry, 1978).

Low-Income Housing in Rural Communities and Reading Access

Rural communities are often characterized by pockets of various kinds of low-income housing. Generally, the population in these areas is largely made up of families with children. Educators and community leaders know that these children are likely to have problems being successful at school. Efforts to provide support are certainly made by school programs and

personnel, but there is often a need for additional support outside of school (Adelman & Taylor, 2008). Community and faith-based support can often be found in many different formats. The following is an example of one program that illustrates the levels of support that might be needed.

One community in rural Illinois has a mobile home park with around 200 mobile homes. Many families with children live there, and they attend local schools. Teachers in the district have long been aware that these students often experience learning difficulties. One teacher decided to try to do something to help. She began discussions with colleagues as well as the pastor and members of her local church.

Eventually it was suggested that the church rent a mobile home at the park and try programming on site. This involved many meetings with the owners of the park and financial considerations for the church, but in June of 2010 the first efforts began. The owners were surprised at the proposal but understood the benefits for the children so helped locate a single-wide mobile home in a central location. From the beginning they established that the program would not have to pay rent for the mobile home, but just pay the standard monthly lot fee.

Initially programming was planned for a morning session for younger children and an afternoon program for older ones with lunch for all served in between. The program was planned for three days a week. It was quickly evident that this schedule did not meet the needs of the participants. Most were accustomed to sleeping until late morning. The schedule was eventually adjusted to lunch served first with programming following. Lessons learned about the culture of the mobile home park were key to the response of the volunteers.

Food security issues became evident early on. Those who came for lunch had not eaten any breakfast. Some indicated that they were not certain that there would be food for an evening meal. Even though educators were involved in all phases of the program, the idea that those who receive free or reduced lunch during the school year might also need support in the summer was another lesson learned. After that initial first year, volunteers worked with the Northern Illinois Food Bank whose focus is on providing free meals for exactly those children. Nutritious lunches are delivered to the site, and the program still uses this resource.

As word spread about the program, community support came in many forms. Some people gave money to help pay for rent and utilities. Local contractors donated services for plumbing, heating, flooring, and other improvements. The single-wide mobile home was not initially air conditioned. Portable units were donated, and eventually central air was installed with the help of many individuals. Neighbors at the mobile home park continue to mow the lawn and help put garbage out. Volunteers of all ages come from the community at large, including several churches. It is clear that many people understand the needs of these children and their families and are willing to support the efforts.

In 2013, the mobile home park was sold with the stipulation that the program be allowed to continue with the reduced rental fee that had been agreed upon. In 2014 the new owners mailed a letter stating that they could see the good the program was doing and in appreciation they would no longer be charging the lot fee or rent of any kind as long as the program continues.

Knowing the risk of summer reading loss for these children (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2013), summer programming has focused on activities and experiences of high interest

to the children. Literacy is a big part with books provided on site as well as given to participants to take home.

Organizers know that these children are not as likely to have additional experiences that support literacy learning and build background knowledge as well as vocabulary such as traveling and visiting museums or zoos (Murnane, et al). Art, math, science and social studies topics have been explored along with some local field trips. The school district has supported the program by providing school bus transportation for field trips. A trip to a local farm is a favorite.

Another asset in rural areas in Illinois is the University of Illinois Home Extension Service. Their staff have come to the mobile home park and provided education in nutrition, working with the children in planting a salsa garden, along with science and art activities. A ripple from these activities has been that some families have planted small gardens on their own lots.

During the school year the program meets after school two days per week. Volunteers meet the children as the school bus drops them off in the mobile home park. During good weather they play on the park's playground (which was refurbished by a local Boy Scout for his Eagle Scout project) for a few minutes. When they go into the mobile home, a substantial snack is provided such as macaroni and cheese or peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, then participants are split up by grade level and volunteers give homework help or do general work on reading and math.

Social skills are woven into all aspects of the program. Respect for each other and volunteers is a cornerstone though not always evident. During the school year, the children share

something about their day as they get ready for snack. All year long they write and sign thank you notes and send get well or sympathy cards as appropriate. Manners and healthy habits with snacks and meals are emphasized. The children help plan for and serve at a volunteer thank you in May.

Communication with classroom teachers and the school has been a key part of the program. Teachers know about the program and can make contacts with volunteers if there are concerns or requests. Needs are anticipated when possible. Before school begins in the fall supplies are gathered (many are donated, some are purchased) and children and their parents bring their school supply list and gather what is required. At times, school library fines have been covered by program funds so that a student can continue to check out books from the school library. During winter months, volunteers make sure all students have necessary winter gear.

Originally discussions about the mobile home park program involved ideas for parent education. While several things have been tried, participation has not been strong. However, the program has built relationships with families and is known as a resource. The manager gives information about programming to new families when they move into the park. One parent and her children have been involved since the program began. That parent now volunteers in a leadership role, and her children volunteer in the program to earn service hours for their schools.

Little Free Libraries in Rural Communities

The program described above provides access to books in several ways as organizers know that access to books is a key factor in literacy development. It can be an obstacle for low-income children but adding books to home libraries greatly impacts these children (Evans et al.,

2010). Public libraries in rural communities are funded by local taxes. For many, as the tax base has eroded difficult decisions are being made to reduce hours, limit materials purchases, or to cut staff. Some small communities lack public libraries either as one was never established or closed due to lack of funding. Some communities base the funding for libraries on the number of books, DVDs, etc. checked out by members of the communities. Other issues for library access include the area the public library serves. For instance, some areas of low-income housing may be out of the library district which means that residents are unable to obtain a free library card and have to pay high fees for use of the library in addition to finding transportation to the facility.

The primary goal is not only access to books but to promote an interest in reading. Having one's own library of books in the home helps children think of themselves as readers (Constantino, 2014). One way to provide books is to provide small, readily accessible libraries within a community.

Teachers and community members in many rural communities have strategically placed Little Free Libraries around parks and neighborhoods and by schools, stores, gas stations, and churches. Begun as a way to honor a former teacher who died, there are currently over 80,000 Little Free Libraries registered worldwide as the program celebrates its tenth year. The principle of Little Free Libraries is "Take a book, leave a book."

In many instances, service organizations such as the Lions Club and Rotary International often provide funds for building the Little Free Libraries or their members build the libraries for the communities. Then the service organizations in subsequent years donate funds for the purchase of books for inclusion in the libraries.

Books for the Little Free Libraries come from donations, book sales by area libraries and garage sales, or bought on line from Thriftbooks at thriftbooks.com. Other sources are book round ups by service organizations or holiday book drives by Barnes and Noble stores.

These small libraries take many forms and sizes. Some are hand built. Some repurpose furniture, old mailboxes or newspaper vending machines. They are often creative works of art. All have the theme "take a book, leave a book" so reading is promoted.

In one school district reading teachers have worked to provide the structure, gather books, and place Little Free Libraries in the two communities that make up the district. Each community has one in a high usage park, plus one inside each of the two local food pantries. Additionally, there is one at a mobile home park. These teachers accept the responsibility of keeping the libraries stocked with books year-round.

In a neighboring school district, Little Free Libraries have been placed on the school grounds in front of the elementary school with different level reading books in each library. This helps meet the needs of all K-6 students. They hope to expand to meet reading needs of middle and high school students. The goal is to have three to four libraries with several choices for students since they lack access to the school library and there is no public library in one of the communities.

Promoting the Little Free Libraries varies from notes sent home with students, to having a "Bike to the Library" with parents, teachers, volunteers and children biking around town to two or three different Little Free Libraries with teachers and volunteers doing book talks about a few of the books at each location. Notes on community bulletin boards at local churches, gas stations, and restaurants also promote the libraries and need for book donations.

Designing Effective Summer Reading Programs

Most teachers are familiar with the phenomenon of students returning to school in the fall having lost significant amounts of reading skill. The loss of reading skill from May through August, known as "summer slide," is a source of frustration and disappointment for teachers and students alike. Summer reading loss is especially common and tragic for at-risk learners. Research suggests at-risk children, when compared to their peers from middle-income homes, arrive at school with less-developed vocabularies, weaker conceptual knowledge, and fewer enriching experiences that form a foundation for strong school achievement (Stanovitch, 1986). Although some may arrive underprepared for school success, at-risk students achieve at rates commensurate with their more fortunate peers during the school year, and with supplemental services often even achieve gains toward closing the achievement gap between the groups (Bracey, 2006).

At-risk children begin their school careers behind academically and are less likely to participate in educational summer experiences common to middle-income children, such as camps, vacations, museum visits, and reading. Attempts to encourage children from low SES homes to use the public libraries tend to be unsuccessful for a number of reasons: lack of transportation, reliance on over-extended families to take children to the library, or being ineligible for a free library card (Jensen, 2009). In addition, when self-selecting books, at-risk readers often choose books at their frustration reading level and later abandon them because of difficulty. Lack of appropriate books in the home is another challenge for children in low-SES families. Middle-income children, on the other hand, continue to participate in educational opportunities over the summer and as a result tend to retain or even increase their academic skills due to these experiences. These conditions lead to an increasing achievement gap between

middle-income and low-SES students, which in turn contributes to greater need for costly intervention services during the school year.

Summer slide is a well-documented effect in Oregon School District. OES Title I teachers looked each year for creative, effective, and economically sustainable programs to help at-risk students retain their school-year achievement over the summer. Previous attempts to engage students in reading activities such as opening the school library over the summer, supplying calendars with daily literacy suggestions, and sending home used books with students at the end of the school year had resulted in minimal participation and poor maintenance of skills. One third grade teacher began to track her students' spring-to-fall reading levels and was dismayed to learn that fully 70% of her at-risk readers had dropped by at least one reading level. With the documentation of skills loss creating an urgent need, Title I teachers read the available research for guidance in devising an effective summer reading program. A couple of studies seemed particularly helpful.

Concerned with loss of reading skill over the summer months, White and Kim (2008) matched at-risk 3rd-5th grade students to books at their reading level. Students received a book in the mail weekly, along with a postcard to be completed and returned to document the use of comprehension and fluency tasks while reading. Fall assessment revealed students who read, and used decoding and comprehension strategies that had been reviewed prior to selecting their books, experienced stable reading levels or growth in their reading skill throughout the summer.

A study by Allington (2010) was conducted in which at-risk children were allowed to self-select 12 books to keep and read over the summer. After three consecutive summers of participation a significant reduction in summer reading skill loss was noted. Though successful

and economical, a drawback of this study is the length of time necessary for effects to be demonstrated. Also, this study determined that disabled readers and those lacking independent reading skill tended to select inappropriately difficult books. Children who could not read the books they had selected could not maintain reading skill. With the guidance supplied by the above studies, administrative approval was sought to supply at-risk 3rd graders with eight free, self-selected books that would be mailed to their homes over the summer. Eighteen students were selected based on the meeting at least three of the following criteria: achievement in the bottom 25th percentile in reading, participation in a literacy intervention, free or reduced lunch status, and home support for learning. Teachers helped students select books at their instructional levels from the Scholastic FACE catalog, a source for low-cost books to be distributed to children. Students' reading levels were recorded in May, and again in August. Following participation in the 2012 summer reading program, 83% of the students maintained reading level, and in fact, 50% of participants gained at least one full reading level. Teachers and students alike were thrilled!

Due to the success of the summer reading pilot, additional grade levels were added to the project with encouraging results. The following table illustrates the success rates for maintaining or increasing of student reading levels:

Annual Comparison of Reading Levels Maintained/Increased (Success Rates)

Year	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Grade	**Control- No intervention**						
1			66%	80%	53%	87%	64%
2			67%	46%	36%	63%	54%
3	**30%**	83%	100%	81%	77%	82%	94%
4			90%	89%	93%	93%	80%
5				100%	100%	100%	89%

Procedures and Costs Associated with the Summer Reading Project

Oregon's summer reading program costs approximately $60 per student, including books, envelopes and postage. Over the years as the participating grade levels have grown, 15 participants per grade level have been the maximum included due to budget. In March, students are nominated by their classroom teachers and must meet at least three out of four criteria (participation in a reading intervention that year, lowest quartile of reading performance in guided reading level, free/reduced lunch status, and home support for learning). In April, parents are sent a letter explaining the program and the need for continued reading practice over the summer. Once parents have agreed their child can participate, teachers help students select eight books from the Scholastic FACE catalog at their independent or instructional reading levels. When the books are received at school teachers put the books into envelopes, to be mailed throughout the summer, one per week.

Student reading levels are recorded in May and are compared with their August reading levels once school begins again in the fall. Classroom teachers and Title I staff assess students, collect and organize the data. One Title I teacher collects all data and summarizes it in a report to the School Board.

The summer reading program time commitment by teachers is significant: grade level teams must meet and determine potential participants. One grade level representative teacher will need a day to meet with students to select books and half a day to organize and stuff and address envelopes. Title I teachers need release time to help assess, collect data and write the summary report. Once books arrive they are organized into boxes by week 1, week 2, and so on. Office staff take the boxes to the post office, who will bill the school for the postage. It is estimated classroom teachers will devote 20 hours to the effort, with Title I teacher requiring about twice that amount of time. The program is a significant investment in time and expense, but the retention of skills has been worth the effort.

Throughout the years of conducting the summer reading program, some noteworthy lessons have been learned. Home support for learning is essential to the success of the program, especially in the younger grades. Early readers still need parents to listen to and encourage their efforts. This need appears to lessen as students grow into more capable, independent readers in the later grades. We learned Kindergarten students are unable to maintain their early reading skills, and as a result we dropped this grade from the program. Students with IEPs for Learning Disability are not helped by the summer reading program, as practice alone appears not to be sufficient to maintain their skills. We've come to realize that student self-selection of books is key, as personal choice and interest in the books is essential for engagement and follow-through with independent reading. It is also necessary to mail books one per week to the home, as

opposed to giving the student all eight books to take home at the end of the school year. Students become excited each week as the book packet arrives and enthusiasm for reading can be maintained.

Attempts to have students respond to books in writing have met with minimal participation. OES teachers have tried a number of ways to entice student response: stamped postcards with space to write to their teachers, journals to return in the fall, and a Facebook page to correspond with teachers about the books. Unfortunately, each attempt was met with limited success. Although teachers would love to have students respond in writing to books, we've determined that these tasks may be perceived as too "schooly" by students and are avoided. It is evident the books are being read and enjoyed, however. Teachers have encountered students over the summer who report their excitement at receiving the books, and fall data on reading skills retention is encouraging. Most significantly, participating students return to school enthused about learning and happy to know their skills have been maintained, or improved, over the long break.

Summary

The challenges of meeting the literacy needs of rural children and teenagers are ongoing but they can be met when creative ideas are engaged. Library access, book access, and summer programming to help prevent summer reading loss require community support outside of the school that meets the particular needs of rural communities.

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Summer Books Timeline	
Date	**Task**
April 8	20(ish) students per grade level identified as possible participants, based on at-risk status: F/R lunch, participation in Tier 2 intervention and home support for reading.
April 15	Parent invitation letter sent home. Inform parents of summer reading program and seek permission to participate. Sample letter provided. Permission forms must be returned for students to participate.
April 22	15 students selected to participate (first come, first served). Acceptance letter sent home, sample letter provided.
April 25-29	Students select books from FACE catalog with grade level teacher-supervisor. Books are selected based on 1. Current reading level and 2. Interest. Use the FACE electronic order form and keep a separate copy of each student's selected titles. Send order form to Scholastic electronically once all students have selected books. OES will be billed. Please submit spring reading levels to Title 1 Coordinator for spring-to-fall data comparison. Data form provided.
Week of May 1	Student address labels printed in office, eight per student. Count taken of stock of manila envelopes for mailing. Order more of various sizes if needed.
May 6-17	1. Cross-reference books as they arrive against your list of students' titles 2. Substitute and reorder any books that are out of stock 3. Prepare small notes of encouragement to be added to each book for packaging (e.g. "I think you will really like this one.") 4. Organize 8 books for each student, easier to harder, alternate fiction/nonfiction if applicable. 5. Stuff 8 manila envelopes per student with books, notes 6. Apply address labels to envelopes 7. Place envelopes in boxes labeled "week 1", etc. for mailing
June 3	Office secretaries mail books in box labeled "week 1"
June 10	Office secretaries mail books in box labeled "week 2"
June 17	Office secretaries mail books in box labeled "week 3"

June 24	Office secretaries mail books in box labeled “week 4”
July 1	Office secretaries mail books in box labeled “week 5”
July 8	Office secretaries mail books in box labeled “week 6”
July 15	Office secretaries mail books in box labeled “week 7”
July 22	Office secretaries mail books in box labeled “week 8”
August 19-23	Receiving classroom teachers conduct running records on all 1st -4th grade students. They are given list of students who participated in summer reading. Each summer reader is asked these questions before assessing: Did you receive your books? How many did you read? Did you enjoy the books? Data sheets are completed and given to Title 1 Coordinator, along with the student responses to above questions. Title 1 teachers generate a report based on spring-to-fall reading level comparison. Report is shared with teachers, administrators and School Board.
September	Students who exceed their spring reading level (grew over the summer) receive a $10 voucher to be used at the fall book fair. Students who maintained their spring reading level are invited to a pizza party hosted by Title 1 teachers.