

**An Examination of a Play-Based Summer Reading Program for Elementary-Aged
Children with Reading Difficulties**

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Preface

The following thesis is one in which a single journal article is the main document. The first part, titled “Context of the Article,” includes an introduction, a review of the literature, and an extended description of the methods used to conduct the research. I have also included reflections on both the literature review and the methodology, as well as a reflection on the thesis writing process. The second part, titled “An Examination of a Play-Based Summer Reading Program for Elementary-Aged Children with Reading Difficulties” includes the article manuscript and the conclusion.

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Abstract

Recent research suggests that summer reading programs may benefit elementary-aged children with learning disabilities and reading difficulties. However, there exists limited literature on how both play-based learning (PBL) and scaffolding can be used to improve reading outcomes in non-school settings. The purpose of this qualitative research was to examine PBL, scaffolding, and perceived reading outcomes in a 6-week play-based summer reading program. The conceptual framework guiding this research is that PBL, when combined with scaffolding, results in either the maintenance or the improvement of reading outcomes. Fourteen individuals (5 support workers, 4 parents, 5 children) who were enrolled in a play-based summer reading program between 2019 and 2021 participated in semi-structured interviews. The findings suggest that PBL and scaffolding can lead to perceived reading progress and increases in confidence and motivation, as well as an absence of a summer learning slide. Additional themes relating to the role of the support workers, program organization and friendship/belonging emerged. Implications for the literacy learning of elementary-aged children with disabilities and reading difficulties are discussed.

Keywords: play-based learning, summer reading programs, scaffolding, reading difficulties

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Part 1: Context for the Journal Article

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Summer learning loss, which is also known as the summer learning slide, refers to the well-documented phenomenon that less advantaged children make significantly smaller reading gains during their summer vacation when compared to their more advantaged counterparts (Cooper et al, 1996). In their meta-analysis of early research on summer learning, Cooper et al discovered that children who are English language learners, have special education needs, or come from lower socio-economic (SES) backgrounds are disproportionately affected by this phenomenon. Kuhfeld (2019) found that summer learning loss can range from 1 to 2 months in reading. There are several possible explanations for summer learning loss, including the faucet theory (Alexander et al., 2007), disparities in access to summer programs (Augustine et al., 2016), the length of the school year (Patall et al., 2010), and test disengagement (Kuhfeld, 2019). In Canada, summer vacation is the longest stretch of non-school time, and regardless of the exact reason for its occurrence, it appears to widen achievement gaps (Davies & Aurini, 2013).

The research has primarily focused on how to address the summer learning slide in children from lower SES homes. Researchers such as Gershenson and Hayes (2017) and Verachtert et al. (2009) contend that the literature ignores summer learning loss in children with learning disabilities (LDs), as well as how summer learning opportunities may be instrumental in narrowing achievement gaps. Preliminary research has found that when children with LDs participate in summer reading programs, they typically experience greater gains than their mainstream counterparts (Gershenson & Hayes, 2017; Patton & Reschly, 2013; Verachtert et al, 2009). This research is relevant given the zeitgeist in Canadian education. Ontario's Right to Read Inquiry Report (2022) found that Ontario's public education system is failing to use evidence-based approaches to teach children how to read, which has a disproportionately negative effect on students with reading difficulties (RDs). There is a call to improve the reading

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outcomes of students in Ontario, considering that evidence-based word-reading instruction can help elementary-aged students read proficiently (Right to Read Inquiry Report, 2022).

The call to support students with LDs through evidence-based instruction is further supported by the suspected widened achievement gaps caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 upended the 2019-2020 school year; most Canadian public schools closed for six consecutive months between March 2020 and September. Many school boards across the country shifted to remote learning, and the number of instructional hours offered to students varied. Students in kindergarten to grade 9 received between 1 and 12 hours of weekly instructional time with their teachers, and students in grades 10 to 12 receive between 2 to 3 hours (Campbell, 2020; Gorbet et al., 2020). Aurini and Davies (2021) estimate that the consequences of learning disruptions during the pandemic are comparable to the learning losses that Canadian children experience during summer vacation. Using data from the literature on chronic absenteeism and the summer learning slide, Kuhfeld et al. (2020) predicted that students returned to school in fall 2020 with approximately 63 to 68% of the learning gains in reading relative to a typical school year. Aurini and Davies (2021) predicted learning losses of 3.5 months among typically performing students, and 6.5 months among lower-performing students. Consequently, students with RDs have been disproportionately affected by the school closures.

Since summer programs have been shown to mitigate learning losses, Davies and Aurini (2021) suggest that summer interventions are one of the strategies for mitigating the potential learning losses caused by the COVID-19 school disruptions. They recommend that school boards and ministries of education commit to supporting summer learning opportunities as of 2022. This recommendation makes my research relevant to the current state of education in Canada.

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My study examines a 6-week play-based summer reading program in Quebec for children with RDs. In this inquiry, RDs includes children with either reading disabilities or difficulties, as well as LDs and attention-deficit/ hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The program, Reading Detectives Summer Club (RDSC), aims to increase motivation and self-esteem in literacy and to build skills in a fun and interactive settings. The play-based approach is meant to promote a relaxed and interactive learning environment that engages children with a variety of learning needs.

RDSC is unique because there is nothing quite like it in the literature. Play-based learning (PBL) is an uncommon pedagogical approach for elementary-aged learners; it is more present in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten learning environments (McLeod et al., 2017; Pelletier & Corter, 2019). This situation is surprising, especially considering that play is an important part of childhood and can help children develop social and teambuilding skills (Burke, 2019). In addition, research such as Rapport et al. (2009) suggest that children with ADHD may benefit from having the opportunity to move and fidget well they learn.

It has been my greatest honour and privilege to conduct this research and contribute to a variety of areas of research in education. My research has important implications for PBL as a form of pedagogy for elementary-aged learners, scaffolding as an instructional strategy during reading instruction, and the potential benefits of summer reading programs for children with RDs. There are many children whom, despite the support of classroom teachers, resource teachers, and reading interventions (school and non-school), struggle to reach reading benchmarks (Right to Read Inquiry Report, 2022). It is therefore important to explore a variety of options that will support the development of reading skills in children. As such, the current study drew on the perceptions of staff, parents, and children, to answer the following research

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questions: What are the experiences of parents, children, and support workers with PBL in a summer reading program? How does scaffolding occur in PBL in a summer reading program? What are the perceived reading outcomes when PBL and scaffolding are combined in a summer reading program?

Researcher Statement

In 2008, I was required to complete 10 community service hours to meet the partial requirements for my grade 7 Ethics and Religious Culture (ERC) course, as per the Quebec Education Program. After researching various volunteer opportunities, a friend and I settled on Reading Detectives, an afterschool literacy program for children ADHD. This program was offered twice weekly by a non-profit community organization. The program had been developed a year prior, and enrollment was relatively low (4-6 children per workshop). As a volunteer, I worked alongside the program teacher to read and play games with the children, and to help them with their homework. After volunteering for a month, I fulfilled the requirements for my ERC course. However, I loved the Reading Detectives program, and I continued to help on a weekly basis.

With time, the program gained momentum and more children registered. In 2010, I was hired as one of the first-ever support workers. In 2014, when I was a second year cégep student, I was asked to take on the role as the program teacher for Reading Detectives. Since then, I have been responsible for developing the curriculum, coordinating the program, and animating the workshops.

In 2015, I personally developed the Reading Detectives Summer Club (RDSC) in response to the needs of the English-speaking families in the community. These families expressed two main concerns: (1) the lack of English educational services during the summer

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months, and (2) the absence of affordable, inclusive summer day camps for English-speaking, neurodiverse children. The RDSC program has run continuously since the summer of 2015, including during the pandemic. The research presented in this thesis is based on RDSC.

Intellectual curiosity drove my desire to conduct this research; I am interested in the experiences and perceptions of the children, parents, and support workers affiliated with the program. Above all, I am eager to add to the limited literature and explore how scaffolding and play-based learning in a non-school setting may contribute to the perceived maintenance or improvement of reading skills.

Literature Review

There are four areas that inform the current research that will be reviewed: (1) out-of-school reading interventions for children with LDs, (2) summer reading programs as a form of out-of-school reading interventions, (3) PBL as a pedagogical approach for elementary-aged children, and (4) scaffolding in reading instruction.

Out-of-school Reading Interventions

Reading is a fundamental life skill; not only is it critical for school success, but it is necessary for a variety of daily activities including following recipes, understanding road signs, and paying bills (Horowitz-Kraus et al., 2017). Reading has been argued to be one of the most important skills for both academic and life success (Wood et al., 2017). Although elementary schools invest a lot of time on reading instruction, many children struggle to achieve reading proficiency, and they may require several years of supplemental and intensive reading intervention to become proficient readers (O'Connor et al., 2014). Dyslexia is the most common reading disability. While dyslexia is assumed to have a neurobiological origin, both early identification and evidence-based intervention/ instruction can often prevent the formal diagnosis

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of a “disability” all together (Right to Read Inquiry Report, 2022). However, Ontario’s Right to Read Inquiry Report (2022) found that Ontario’s public education system is not using evidence-based approaches to teach children how to read, and this is disproportionately affecting students with RDs. Evidence-based interventions are necessary, and families sometimes seek reading interventions outside of the public school system.

Out-of-school reading interventions for elementary-aged children are evidence-based interventions that supplement rather than supplant the reading interventions that occur during the school day. Supplemental education is sometimes referred to as “shadow education,” as it is often a close parallel to the instruction and curriculum in public schools. It can be difficult to conduct research on supplemental education. Tutoring and instruction at learning centers are often private, unregulated, and not affiliated with the public education sector (Aurini et al., 2013). However, common evidence-based out-of-school reading interventions include computer-assisted instruction for individuals using high-quality computer programs (Chambers et al., 2008; Cullen et al., 2014; Savage et al., 2009), small group instruction in after-school settings (Krafnick et al., 2011; Roberts et al., 2018; Tamm et al., 2017), and one-to-one or two-to-one tutoring with an adult or professional (Bøg et al., 2021; Villiger et al., 2019). The consensus of current research on non-school reading interventions is that early intervention (i.e., before grade 4) is the most effective strategy for improving the reading outcomes for children with reading disabilities (RDs) or difficulties (Gabrieli, 2009; Gilbert et al., 2013; Schatschneider & Torgesen, 2004). However, children with RDs and LDs are not the only population of children requiring additional support for reading instruction. Children with ADHD often need additional support as well, especially considering that children with ADHD often have comorbid RDs (Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, 2021). Research by Reed (2019) suggests that when children

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(grades 2 to 5) have comorbid ADHD/RD, each exceptionality needs to be addressed separately, using different approaches.

Community-based reading interventions are a common form of non-school reading intervention, especially for children of families from low-income neighbourhoods. Community-based reading interventions are characterized as reading interventions that are not offered in a hospital or school setting. Bayless et al. (2018) examined the effects of combining three common community-based after-school programs (ASP) on the reading skills of children in kindergarten to third grade. Participants received a structured literacy and reading intervention (3 times per week for 45 minutes), one-on-one tutoring (once per week for 45 minutes), and a choice-based book distribution program. ASP participants had better reading proficiency than the intent-to-treat comparison group. Other studies on community-based reading interventions reported similar gains in the reading proficiency of low-SES children following participation in the programs (Bowers & Schwarz, 2018; McDaniel et al., 2017). Overall, non-school reading programs involving small-group or individual instruction have therefore demonstrated their efficacy in improving reading skills among some elementary-aged children with reading difficulties and/or ADHD.

Summer Reading Programs

Chief among the options for out-of-school reading interventions are summer reading programs. However, the research on summer programs to date has primarily focused on preventing the summer learning loss of children from low-SES backgrounds (Patton & Reschly, 2013; Schacter & Jo, 2005). Summer learning loss, which is also known as the summer learning slide, refers to the well-documented phenomena that children from low-income homes make significantly smaller reading gains during their summer vacation when compared to their more

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economically advantaged counterparts. In Canada, summer vacation is the longest stretch of non-school time, and it appears to widen achievement gaps (Davies & Aurini, 2013). While summer reading programs exist to combat summer learning inequality, low enrollment and high attrition are common limitations of these programs (Denton et al, 2010; Schacter & Jo, 2005). Attrition is high and enrollment is low even when enrichment activities (e.g., sports, field trips, art activities) are offered within the reading programs (Denton et al., 2010). It is evident that there exists in-depth research on summer programs designed to mitigate summer learning loss. However, researchers such as Gershenson and Hayes (2017) and Verachtert et al. (2009) contend that the literature vastly ignores how summer learning opportunities may benefit children with LDs. While children with LDs are in fact participating in summer reading programs and experiencing greater gains than their mainstream counterparts, these children are often not the population of interest in studies exploring summer reading programs because the focus seems to be placed primarily on children from low-SES backgrounds (Gershenson & Hayes, 2017).

Reed et al. (2019) reported one of the only studies that has examined children with LDs in the summer context. They conducted research to examine the effects of a summer reading program for 470 children (K to grade 4) who had individual education plans and had a RD or were at risk for developing one. The program was offered for a total of 28 days during the children's summer vacation. The children received three hours of reading instruction per day, for a total of 84 hours. Reed et al. found that not all children are impacted the same way following a reading intervention. For example, while children generally benefitted from the program, only children in grades 1 and 4 showed improvements in reading ability and post-test gains on the five RAPID subscales, which was the outcome measure of interest.

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Schacter and Jo (2005) evaluated the effectiveness of their summer program based on pre- to post-test reading improvement among children attending the summer intervention. Their study found that children who were in the summer day camp experienced gains in decoding and comprehension. However, the lack of a comparison group in this study makes it difficult to determine whether the gains were due to the reading intervention or natural progression. One potential strength of the Reed et al. (2019) study is that they attempted to control for the errors in Schacter and Jo by using propensity score analysis to estimate the causal effects of the reading program. Moreover, a control group was formed by eligible participants who were either not invited to participate in the intervention because of funding restraints, or eligible participants who chose not to attend.

Summer reading programs may take on many different forms. Some programs, for example, do not provide literacy instruction. Instead, they provide children with summer reading books that are matched to their reading level and interests (White et al., 2014). Other programs have provided additional support by training and encouraging parents to engage in at-home reading for at least five days a week (Knapp, 2016). The most common summer programs seem to be summer reading day camps, such as the interventions by Schacter and Jo (2005) and Reed et al. (2019). While some programs focus on specific literacy instruction (Beach & Philippakos, 2021), other programs take a different approach by choosing not to teach specific reading skills. For example, Lara-Cinisomo et al. (2020) described a program that followed this approach. Their intervention took the form of a day camp, and 2.5 hours every day were dedicated to the reading program. This program included an opening activity to engage children with a book, a main activity to read and discuss the book, and finally a cooperative group activity. Reed and Aloe (2020) followed a similar format for their day camp; 2 hours every morning were devoted to

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reading instruction, and the afternoons were reserved for recreational activities such as field trips and crafts. However, their program taught specific reading skills by including time in the schedule for guided reading with a qualified teacher, independent reading, and interactive writing workshops. While not reading-specific, the Ontario summer learning project consisted of 3 weeks of full-day classes with one certified teacher and one teaching assistant (Aurini & Davies, 2013). This program also tried to promote an enjoyable ‘camp-like’ atmosphere by including a recreational component, as well as free healthy meals and snacks for the participants. In summary, there does not appear to be a single approach to summer reading programs; summer reading programs are very diverse in nature.

Play-Based Learning

While literacy day camps are a common type of summer reading program, many have themes of active learning or follow a play-based pedagogical approach to literacy learning (Beach et al., 2018; Johnston et al., 2015). PBL is a child-centered form of learning that unifies play and educational pedagogy. It focuses on the child’s academic, social, and emotional development (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). PBL can be described on a continuum that includes five types of play: (a) free play, (b) inquiry play, (c) collaborative play, (d) playful learning, and (e) learning through games (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). Here, free play is categorized by uninterrupted child-led play, while inquiry play is the process of expanding on the natural interests of a child that appear through play. Collaborative play occurs when teachers and children create a context of play together. Playful learning consists of prescribed activities that have playful elements. When “learning through games” is practised, children are intentionally learning academic content or skills (i.e., adding, subtracting, sight words, etc.) through teacher-created games that have explicit rules. Smilansky (1968) identified six categories of play by observing preschool

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children with low-SES in both the United States and Israel. In one of these categories, “games with rules,” children are expected to accept and conform to a set of pre-established rules. When children participate in the play-based modality of “learning through games,” they are participating in what Smilansky (1968) would call a “rule-bound game.” Burke (2019) believes that play is inherently social, and she argues that rule-bound games encourage negotiation and teambuilding. However, there is limited research on PBL and teamwork.

One PBL technique that is commonly used to support the language development of pre-school children is Enhance Milieu Teaching (EMT). For example, McLeod et al. (2017) read books to participants (n=2) to introduce them to new words. Following the book reading with an interventionist, the participants were exposed to a variety of play materials that allowed the interventionist to prompt the use of the new vocabulary words. EMT shows promise because McLeod et al. found that both participants demonstrated unprompted use of all the target words during the follow-up play sessions.

Recent research suggests that PBL is an effective form of pedagogy, but the majority of research on PBL is focused on pre-kindergarten and kindergarten children (McLeod et al., 2017; Pelletier & Corter, 2019). No research on PBL to date has been conducted on children with RDs, LDs, or ADHD. In the Canadian context, the majority of the data on PBL in kindergarten is the result of a natural experiment that occurred when Ontario implemented a two-year play-based full-day kindergarten (FDK) program over the course of five years. With some children still enrolled in a half-day kindergarten program (HDK), researchers such as Pelletier and Corter (2019) were able to compare the longitudinal learning outcomes of children who participated in HDK and FDK. They found that there are long-term gains to FDK, as children in FDK performed better on five of the six outcome measures at the end of grade 2: self-regulation,

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reading, writing, vocabulary and number knowledge. Additional analysis examined the results of provincial test scores (i.e. measures of reading, writing, mathematics), and compared children from the FDK cohort to the HDK cohort. Children in FDK were more likely to exceed or achieve the provincial norms on this standardized test.

Summer reading programs, whether they are designed to minimize the summer learning slide or improve the reading outcomes of children with LDs, usually follow a well-known program or take a specific pedagogical approach. For example, Johnston et al. (2015) found positive gains from a summer reading program that included reading fluency research-based strategies (i.e., repeated reading, one-on-one reading, small and large group activities) and comprehension techniques (i.e., identifying the main idea, making connections to the text, and predicting future events in the story). Moreover, Reed et al. (2019) used Wonders (McGraw-Hill Education, 2017), and Christodoulou et al. (2017) used the program Seeing Stars by Lindamood-Bell. While many programs do not solely follow a play-based approach, there are themes of “learning through games” in many of them. For example, Beach et al. (2018) evaluated the effects of a 15-day summer reading intervention. The intervention consisted of 60-minute lessons on reading and spelling sounds, word reading and spelling, sight word reading and spelling, sentence reading and book reading. Teachers reviewed topics, as needed, using PBL techniques such as flash cards and games like memory match. In the summer intervention examined by Lara-Cinisomo et al. (2020), manipulatives were used in a small group setting. Johnston et al. (2015) also used components of a PBL pedagogy by teaching reading comprehension through science experiments where children had to follow step-by-step instructions, and reading games such as MadLibs, hangman, and word searches.

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Teachers generally express positive feelings about the idea of PBL. However, in a study by Martlew et al. (2011), teachers identified that assessing learning was one challenge of using PBL. Martlew et al. explain that learning in a play-based setting is often independent, with the occasional support of the teacher, parent helpers, or classroom assistants. Furthermore, PBL in the classroom often takes the form of both whole-class activities and small-group activities. Children typically disengage from whole-class activities more easily, and more teacher scaffolding occurs in small-group activities. While education professionals often agree that play is a good way of socializing children, play in elementary schools is often limited to the playground and physical education classes. Parents and educators often put value on play in learning settings as long as it also explicitly focuses on school-based learning. Burke (2019) explains that while there is research that shows connections between play and skill development, parents and educators often struggle to see how learning gained through play is transferable to the classroom. In addition, while play is good for socialization and skill development, it does not always fit well within the structure of school and the expected behaviors of children in school.

Overall, research on PBL for elementary-aged children is limited, and there are potential barriers regarding learning assessments and evaluations. Despite this, PBL, more specifically the idea of ‘learning through games,’ is gaining popularity amongst elementary educators and parents, and there is an increasing market for card games, BINGO games, and board games that focus on academic learning, specifically math and literacy. These games are often readily available for purchase in stores. However, while PBL is predominant in the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten contexts, it does not seem to be used as the main pedagogical approach with elementary-aged children. Instead, themes of “learning through games” seem to be embedded throughout the elementary curriculum to support math and literacy learning (Burke, 2019). For

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example, elementary classrooms sometimes have literacy centres that allow for in-depth explorative play with language. Burke (2019) explains that a strict hierarchy of lesson plans is not the only way to develop language and literacy skills. Another way to develop reading skills is by immersing children in a rich environment where they are encouraged to explore and are rewarded for their efforts. A curriculum that infuses learning into play is another way of developing reading skills. Burke claims that when play is used to creatively encourage emergent literacy, scaffolding becomes important.

Scaffolding in Reading Instruction

Wood et al. (1976) describes scaffolding as teaching that works to transfer task responsibility from the tutor to the learner. Scaffolding is sometimes conceptualized as “contingent teaching,” because the help a tutor provides depends on a learner’s abilities; a tutor is expected to provide less help when the learner is successful, and more help when the learner is unsuccessful. According to Wood, scaffolding occurs in contingent tutoring when three conditions are present: temporal contingency (deciding when to provide help), instructional contingency (deciding how much help to provide), and domain contingency (deciding what to focus on). Outside of school-based reading interventions, scaffolding has been used in a variety of instructional contexts such as in classroom (Maloch, 2002), with small groups of students (Jadallah et al., 2011), and with student peers (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005). The current consensus in research is that scaffolding is associated with improved student learning (van de Pol & Elbers, 2013).

Scaffolding is a common instructional strategy when teaching elementary-aged children how to read. Taylor et al. (2000) have found that scaffolding children during reading is just as important for reading growth as teaching specific reading skills, such as decoding. However,

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scaffolding is typically present in reading interventions that occur during the school day (Spichtig et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2000), and it is common in school-based tutor- child dyads (Rodgers, 2004; Rodgers et al., 2016). It is especially present in early literacy interventions (McGee & Nelson, 2013). However, scaffolding has yet to be explored in the context of a summer reading program for children with RDs.

Summary

Overall, the benefits of non-school reading programs for children with RDs are well-documented. Summer reading programs that use small-group and individual instruction show promise for boosting reading skills, and PBL improves the early literacy skills and self-regulation of kindergarten children. In addition, scaffolding is an effective instructional strategy for school-based reading interventions. At this point, the research has been largely outcomes-based, and little is known about the experiences of elementary-aged children, their parents, and program facilitators with play-based summer programs that are designed to improve reading skills. There is a need for qualitative research to explore whether PBL and scaffolding, when combined in a summer reading program, can lead to the perceived maintenance or improvement of reading abilities.

Reflections on the Literature Review

The literature review began during my first semester, when I was registered in the course-based Master of Education and had not yet considered writing a thesis. My graduate-level courses peaked my interest, especially since they encouraged me to conduct research and literature reviews in areas of education that were relevant to my professional practice. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, I spent my days in my home office sifting through the uOttawa library database. Before this time, I had never experienced enjoyment in reading

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academic papers, partly because I never learned to read them efficiently. During my undergraduate degree, I read journal articles for classes and viewed the content as “testable material.” I consistently tried to memorize nuanced details for exams. This was a stressful experience that did not actually facilitate my learning. My graduate degree quickly changed my relationship with journal articles. By the end of my first semester, I was able to not only read and synthesize large amounts of information, but I was also able to find enjoyment in the process. After reading what felt like hundreds of research papers, I realised that I wanted to be the one to write them.

Even though I had been responsible for Reading Detectives since 2014, I never had the opportunity to dive into the literature that was pertinent to the program. During my first semester of grad school, I conducted thorough literature reviews and produced two research papers. When I made the decision to switch to a thesis-based program the following semester, I had already produced literature reviews in three distinct areas: (1) non-school reading interventions, (2) reading interventions for students with LDs and RDs, and (3) PBL.

Through conducting literature reviews, I started to realize a gap in the current research. A program like RDSC did not seem to exist in the literature. Summer reading programs appeared to fall under the scope of non-school reading interventions, but these programs were often geared towards minimizing the summer learning slide for students from low SES backgrounds. Very few programs focused on developing the reading skills of elementary-aged children with RDs. While the literature on PBL was widespread, it focused on pre-kindergarten and kindergarten students. Moreover, I had read about the concept of “learning through games,” and this idea seemed to be everywhere I looked, especially online and in the classrooms of the school at which I was working. Research on RDSC seemed to be needed, not only because it was of personal

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interest to me, but because it seemed to fill in many gaps in the literature. In addition to being a play-based reading program for elementary-aged children, it was also a summer reading program for children with disabilities and reading difficulties.

It became apparent that I was on the right track and that separate literature reviews were needed. As I continued to explore the literature, I conducted literature reviews in four areas: (1) PBL, (2) summer reading interventions, (3) community-based reading interventions, and (4) scaffolding in reading instruction. After an initial reading, the articles were placed in summary tables that included the following headings: reference, context, purpose, theoretical framework, research methods, findings. For summer reading interventions and community-based interventions, an additional heading, “intervention description,” was added. Using the table as an organization tool allowed me to make comparisons easily and see emerging themes in the literature. For example, the table helped me notice that many summer reading interventions included themes of PBL, but none of them took a strictly PBL to teaching literacy skills. I continued to make tables throughout my thesis process, as they provided a framework for organizing my thoughts. I learned that my writing process was always smoother when I took the time to type my thoughts in a table. I wish I had learned about this organizational strategy earlier in my academic career!

Methodology

This research followed a basic qualitative approach in which interviews were used to understand the experiences of children, parents, and support workers who participated in RDSC between 2019 and 2021. I was interested in experiences and perceptions relating to PBL, scaffolding, and reading gains. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain that the basic qualitative approach should be used when researchers are concerned with learning how participants interpret

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their experiences, and what meaning they attribute to those experiences. Therefore, a qualitative approach appeared to be the most appropriate one to take as a means of conducting this study. In most forms of qualitative research, data are usually collected through interviews (Merriam & Tisdall, 2016), and this data collection method was used to conduct the current research.

Recruitment

Eligible participants included the parents of children who attended RDSC between 2019 and 2021, the children who were registered in the program, and support workers associated with the program over those years. These criteria resulted in three distinct groups of participants: (1) parents, (2) children with RDs, LDs, or ADHD, and (3) support workers.

While my initial plan was to include all participants since the program's onset in 2015, the Ethics Review Board encouraged me to reconsider. They suggested, for example, that a child who was 8 years-old when they participated in RDSC in 2015 may not be a reliable reporter in 2022. As such, selection of participants was purposeful because it was important to recruit individuals who had experienced the phenomenon under study (RDSC) and who could potentially provide rich, accurate information (O'Leary, 2017).

Participants were recruited through the Facebook page and monthly newsletter of the community group in Quebec responsible for RDSC. The potential pool of participants included 11 support workers/ volunteers, 37 children, and 24 sets of parents, and they were to be accepted on a first come first serve basis. However, only 15 individuals replied to the call for participants, and 14 individuals consented to an interview. This response was somewhat disappointing as I expected to recruit between three and six participants for each group, for a maximum of 18 participants. I also expected to reach a point of redundancy between three and six participants

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(Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The range of participants was used to account for any potential difficulties in recruiting participants.

To protect anonymity, participant names have been changed to pseudonyms and identifying factors were removed from the transcripts. Children, parents, and support workers affiliated with RD at the time of the study were excluded from the pool of participants to avoid potential conflict of interest. The voluntary nature of the research was clearly communicated to participants so that they did not feel coerced to contribute.

Data Collection

An interview guide was developed based on the theoretical framework and research questions guiding the research. In addition to demographic questions, all three groups of participants were asked questions about the program, PBL, scaffolding, reading outcomes, and other outcomes. Patton (2015) suggests six types of interview questions, and the questions in the interview guide utilized five of these types of questions: (1) experience and behaviour questions, (2) opinion and values questions, (3) feeling questions, (4) knowledge questions, and (5) background/ demographic questions.

Once the interview guide was developed, one support worker and one parent participated in a pilot semi-structured interview as a means of field testing the questions (Merriam & Tisdall, 2016). Verbatim transcripts were produced and sent to each participant to provide an opportunity to make changes to their responses to ensure that the words accurately expressed their thoughts (Guest et al., 2012; Mero-Jaffe, 2011). There were no revisions to the transcripts. The researcher and a supervisor reviewed the transcripts independently, and then met to compare notes and themes. Changes to the interview guide were subsequently made based on the data that emerged from the pilot interviews.

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All participants partook in an in-depth semi-structured interview conducted via Zoom. Parents provided demographic information about their children, and they were prompted to describe their experiences with RDSC. The purpose of the child interview was to glean information about their experiences with the reading program, play-based learning, and scaffolding activities. Support workers were also asked about their experience with RDSC. The focus of the support worker interviews was to understand exactly how scaffolding occurs during PBL. Verbatim transcripts were produced and general themes from the transcripts were sent to the participants for their approval.

Data Analysis

Siedman (2019) encourages researchers to avoid in-depth analysis of the interview data until all interviews have been completed. In doing so, researchers can avoid transferring meaning from one interview to the next. As such, in-depth data analysis began once all interviews had been completed. O’Leary (2017) implores researchers to list their assumptions and preconceived notions before beginning data analysis. Acknowledging biases allows for data analysis that manages subjectivities.

The first step in the data analysis process was to do a line-by-line exploration by reading and re-reading the transcripts (O’Leary, 2017). Notations were made in the margins of the transcripts about passages that were interesting, potentially relevant, or important to the study. Codes emerged through this process, and the codes merged into categories (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Through coding and categorizing, themes emerged for each group of participants. A supervisor analyzed the transcripts independently to provide an inter-rater reliability check (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Tables were created with themes that followed the theoretical framework, and subthemes that emerged from the transcripts.

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Trustworthiness

The two indicators of trustworthiness that were used in this research were credibility and transferability. Transferability, or external validity, refers to the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Transferability was achieved by providing rich, thick descriptions of the learning environment at RDSC. Credibility, also known as internal validity, is concerned with how well research findings match reality (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To help establish the credibility of the data in this study, member checks, triangulation, peer examination, and reflexivity were used.

Member checks, or respondent validation, helped us ensure that the main themes accurately reflect the thoughts of participants (O'Leary, 2017). The goal of member checks is to solicit feedback directly from study participants. This is usually accomplished by emailing the interview transcripts to each participant, inviting them to correct, add, or redact information to ensure that the data accurately represents their thoughts. However, this practice often results in the participants correcting grammar and phrasing. To overcome this potential obstacle, major themes emerging from the interview data were emailed to each participant. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain that while a researcher's themes may use different words, participants should be able to recognize their experience in these words. Credibility was further enhanced through peer review; both the researcher and one of the supervisors conducted independent analysis of the data and compared findings (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

Triangulation was also used in this study by using multiple sources of data (Denzin, 1978). Instead of using just one group of participants to gather information on the theoretical framework and answer the research questions, interviews were conducted with three different

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groups of participants: (1) parents, (2) children with RDs, LDs, or ADHD, and (3) support workers.

Reflexivity refers to the researcher's awareness of the influence they have on the study, as well as how they affect and are affected by the research process (Manen, 2014). Reflexivity was especially important in this study given the researcher's positionality. Not only was the researcher conducting a study on RDSC, but she also designed the program and was responsible for coordinating it. O'Leary (2017) discusses the importance of honestly outlining both the study's limitations, and the strategies that have been executed to gather credible data and generate trustworthy results given the limitations. Given this, the researcher put strategies in place early on to ensure that the results of the research would be credible. Table 1 shows the strategies that were used to address the limitations.

Table 1

Limitations and Strategies to Enhance Trustworthiness

Limitation	Strategies
Positionality of the first author	Use a reflexive journal after each interview as a tool to bracket biases and remain open-minded (Manen, 2014; O'Leary, 2017).
Power dynamic between the researcher and proposed pool of participants	Disclose the conflict of interest to the participants. Exclude participants (parents, children, support workers) who are currently affiliated with RD. Communicate that participants' responses will be kept confidential and will not impact their future involvement with RD or RDSC. Communicate that the research is being conducted independently of the organization responsible for RD and RDSC. Communicate that the decision to participate in the research is completely at the discretion of the participants. Remind participants that they can pass on an interview question if desired.

Reflections on the Methodology

The process of obtaining ethics encouraged me to think critically about my research, and in doing so ensured integrity in knowledge production and the sense of responsibility I felt

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towards the participants (O' Leary, 2017). The main concern for ethical consideration was my unique position; I had personally developed RDSC, and now I was seeking the opportunity to conduct research on the program. Perhaps even more concerning was the fact that I still coordinated the program. This matter was made transparent, first to my supervisors and then to my thesis committee. Ultimately, the Research Ethics Board determined that it was an acceptable situation. Based on the recommendations of my supervisors and thesis committee, I acknowledged early on that my positionality as first author was a limitation and strategies were put in place to ensure that my research would be credible.

Recruitment, interviewing, and transcription took place over a 2.5-month period. Participants were recruited through the Facebook page and monthly newsletter of the community organization responsible for RDSC. Participants were accepted on a first come first serve basis. As participants expressed interest in participating, an interview time was scheduled, and the verbatim transcript was produced in the following weeks. The transcription process was tedious, as I committed to transcribing every word, and sometimes sounds, that the participants produced. Occasionally participants would go on long tangents, and this would make me impatient knowing that I had to transcribe the tangents. Moreover, some of the children with ADHD were easily distracted by their surroundings, and I had to be aware of this tendency and re-direct the conversation. There were times during the interviews that I felt frustrated by the tangents and distractions, and I worried that my language would reflect those feelings. However, the transcripts show that I presented myself both professionally and with poise. This was an important realization for me as both a researcher and an educator; it showed that even though I might feel frustrated, antsy or stressed on the inside, those feelings are not necessarily conveyed in my demeanour.

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The transcripts were sent to one of my supervisors as they were produced, and major themes were identified. This provided an inter-rater reliability check (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We then met to discuss the themes. I used tables to organize themes and sub-themes for each group of participants (i.e., children, support workers, parents). With this visual presentation of the themes, the emerging themes became obvious. The themes were summarized and emailed to the parents and support workers for their approval, and there were no revisions. The themes were compared to the existing literature on PBL, scaffolding, and reading outcomes from summer programs. Some unexpected themes emerged from the data (e.g., role of support workers, friendship/ belonging, organization), and additional research was done to situate these themes in the literature.

While I enjoyed conducting the interviews, I personally found that analyzing the interviews and reading the literature were the most pleasant and stimulating experiences during the thesis writing process. Organizing the themes into tables was easier than I anticipated, and it facilitated the writing of the findings section.

Overall Reflections

I would have liked to say that I have never stepped foot on the uOttawa campus, but I went to the bookstore this past September to buy a crewneck. It was the first week of classes, and as I wandered the grounds, I imagined how different my graduate experience would have been if it weren't for the pandemic. Would I have moved from Montreal to Ottawa? Probably. Would I have made more friends, and had more meaningful connections? Very likely. Would I have even pursued this specific degree? Doubtful. It is absurd to think that during my 2 years as a student at the University of Ottawa, I only ever took one trip down Autoroute 417. This was the reality of

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the pandemic. We were asked to stay home, and so I did. The entirety of this degree was completed from my home office and, if I'm being honest, my couch.

As much as I wish I had the typical grad school experience, I'm also grateful that I didn't. Being able to pursue my degree from a distance allowed me the time and flexibility to be more than just a student. I've set roots in Montreal, and I've had countless professional opportunities I wouldn't have had had I relocated to Ottawa. Since September 2020, I've implemented a community-based social and emotional learning program, worked as a supply teacher, and even took on a year-long contract as a part-time special education technician. While my schedule was busy at times, I felt a sense of work-school-life balance that I never experienced as an undergraduate student. It was helpful that my first supervisor, Cheryll, encouraged and supported this. Early in the thesis writing process, Cheryll reminded me that it was important to celebrate small milestones. This helped me prioritize my self-care, and progress was recognized with the things I love: time spent with friends and family, time spent outdoors, soccer, yoga, and in more recent months, travel.

I've learned a lot about myself through this process. Firstly, I've realized that breaks work. It may seem obvious to some, but in the past, I've measured progress by the number of hours I've sat in front of my computer. Sometimes, it really helped to step away from my work and come back to it with fresh eyes. Daunting tasks always seemed more manageable after taking some time away. Although, I imagine at times my breaks were a little too long (days or weeks instead of hours) and set my timeline back a bit. I've also learned that sometimes I need to talk through my thought processes to make sense of them. It was helpful to talk through sections of my paper with Cheryll, and I'm grateful that she was always willing to chat through problems

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with me. I also have friends who work in research, and I valued that they were often willing to offer both a listening ear and thoughtful advice when needed.

My most important lesson is that I am compelled by qualitative research. I have always valued quantification and have been driven to test hypotheses and be as objective as possible. As a psychology major, I was taught to value randomized control trials as the gold standard for experimental design, and I have clear memories of skipping over the qualitative chapters in my research methodology textbooks. Before this research, I never seriously considered the value of qualitative research. However, I see now that it has so much to offer. I have learned to appreciate subjectivities, as well as varying perspectives and realities. Qualitative research places value on the social complexities, perspectives, lived experiences, and belief systems of humanity. I did not expect to enjoy interviewing participants as much as I did. The process served as a reminder about how much can be learned simply by listening. I value connection and relationships with others, and it was rewarding to collect data in a way that emphasized these values. However, I struggled with data analysis. It felt like I was taking such rich descriptions and minimizing them to codes, categories, and themes. I couldn't help but feel that value was being taken away from the words of my participants. Member checks helped address this feeling, because participants confirmed that their experiences were captured by the themes that Cheryll and I identified.

I think that the qualitative approach to this research fits well with the values of RDSC. At its core, RDSC embodies the opposite of standardized approaches to education. In schools, we are often trying to make students fit into the constraints of the classroom. I have always been curious about how we can adapt a student's learning environment to match their learning needs. I've had academic accommodations since cégep, so this is of personal interest to me as well. I

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speak openly about the accommodations I've received, and I truly believe that I would not have made it this far in my education without them.

Assessment is a huge part of classroom learning and learning within a standardized education framework. The quantitative researcher in me wants numbers; I want to see how reading progresses over time, and I want to measure gains with standardized reading tests. I feel like numbers would show that this program works, and that numbers would hold more weight than the experiences and perceptions of participants. All the while, I recognize that by doing interviews, the research took a more whole-person approach to assessment. I had the opportunity to sit with the parents, children, and support workers, and hear their first-person accounts of what worked and what didn't work. That experience was a gift.

Since qualitative research was new to me, there were times where I had absolutely no idea what I was doing. This might sound strange coming from a graduate student, but I'm not ashamed to admit it. At first, I purchased three books on qualitative research and committed myself to reading them all, front to back. I quickly learned that this was not a good use of my time. Instead, I started to see my books as references, and I used them at varying stages throughout the research process to help me answer specific questions. I had many other firsts in this thesis writing process, aside from qualitative research itself. I had never written a proposal, developed a theoretical framework, or written an interview guide. Luckily, Cheryll helped get me started on a lot of these steps, and her guidance facilitated my learning and helped me meet important milestones in my research.

This research is personal, perhaps even more personal than research typically is. I've found myself in such a unique position because I identify not only as the researcher, but as the person who both developed and currently coordinates the program. It was important to bracket

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my biases, and I took many steps to ensure trustworthiness despite my positionality. My biggest concern was that I would be interviewing individuals that I had pre-existing relationships with. In a way, this worked in my favor because I got to skip the “establishing rapport” part of the interview (O’Leary, 2017). However, I had two very conflicting fears. On one end, I feared that I would learn that RDSC isn’t as successful as I thought. I’m aware that this fear was slightly irrational, given the amount of returning children we have from year to year, as well as the positive feedback the program continuously receives. My other fear was perhaps a little more realistic; I felt that the participants would indulge me by telling me what they thought I wanted to hear. To address this, I kept a reflexive journal and did ‘post-interview data dumps’ (O’Leary, 2017). One evening, after my interview with Samantha, I wrote the following:

At times I felt like Samantha was telling me the things that I wanted to hear, but I sincerely know that there is truth to her words. I have seen tremendous improvements in Joshua’s emotional regulation, reading, writing, and math over the years. The very first day that he came to RDSC, he refused to sit in circle and in the weeks after, he would often sit off to the side during reading activities. This past summer, he was the first to share his feelings in circle, and he played the reading games passionately, often recommending his own variations and rules to the games. These days, he only avoids circle and the reading activities when there is something bothering him. It’s his way of seeking one-on-one attention from me. And often, when I take the time to talk through his problems with him, he is quick to reintegrate in the group.

Reflections like this reminded me that even though participants might have shared what they thought I wanted to hear, there is often still truth to those thoughts.

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My perceptions on RDSC have changed since conducting this research. In a way, I have more confidence in my skills as an educator and program developer. It was validating to hear the experiences of the parents, children, and support workers affiliated with the program. I learned that the parents and children felt safe at RDSC, and that the support workers felt supported by me. I also learned that the format of the program works well, and that everyone typically appreciates that the mornings are reserved for learning and the afternoons are reserved for recreational activities. As I prepare for RDSC this summer, I have made changes that were informed by my research findings to the scaffolding workshop that I give support workers during training. It is my eighth year running RDSC, and after spending the past year reading the literature and studying the program, I feel more prepared than ever before to support the children, parents, and support workers.

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**Part 2: Article: An Examination of a Play-Based Summer Reading Program for
Elementary-Aged Children with Reading Difficulties**

**An Examination of a Play-Based Summer Reading Program for Elementary-Aged
Children with Reading Difficulties**

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**An Examination of a Play-Based Summer Reading Program for Elementary-Aged
Children with Reading Difficulties**

Reading ability is a key determinant of future academic success (Horowitz-Kraus et al., 2017). However, many children in elementary school fail to master the reading skills necessary for secondary school (Williams et al., 2017). There is a need to provide better support for the reading development of elementary-aged children, especially those with disabilities. Research shows that children with learning disabilities (LDs) are among the population of children who have the most trouble developing reading proficiency (Kim et al., 2017).

LDs are neurological disorders that affect the brain's ability to store, process, retrieve, and communicate information (Learning Disabilities Association of Canada [LDAC], 2018). During the 2015-2016 academic year, it was estimated that 6.9% of children in publicly funded schools in Ontario had either an identified or unidentified LD (Learning Disabilities Association of Ontario [LDAO], 2018). LDs range in severity and are distinct from global intellectual deficiency. They may interfere with skills relating to oral language, reading, written language, and mathematics (LDAO, 2018). Dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, and auditory processing disorder are common types of LDs. Attention-deficit/ hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder that can co-occur with LDs, but it is not always classified as a LD (LDAC, 2018). The LDAO explains that individuals with LDs can benefit from interventions that focus on: (1) specific skill instruction, (2) developing compensatory strategies, (3) acquiring self-advocacy skills, and (4) accommodations.

There are many children whom, despite the support of classroom teachers, resource teachers, and reading interventions (school and non-school), struggle to reach reading benchmarks. Recent research has shown promise for out-of-school reading interventions,

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(Krafnick et al., 2011; Roberts et al., 2018; Tamm et al., 2017), scaffolding in instructional contexts (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005; Jadallah et al., 2011; Maloch, 2002), and summer reading programs for students of low socioeconomic status (SES; Bowers & Schwarz, 2018; McDaniel et al., 2017; Patton & Reschly, 2013; Schacter & Jo, 2005). However, it is important to explore a range of ways to improve the reading outcomes of children with reading difficulties (RDs), including summer programs. In this inquiry, RD is a generalized term used to describe children with LDs, ADHD, and/or children who have struggled to learn to read. Many summer programs combine recreation and academics, and some incorporate themes of play-based learning (PBL) in their reading interventions (Beach et al. 2018; Contesse et al., 2021; Johnston et al., 2015). The current study explores one such program, drawing on the perceptions of staff, parents, and children, to answer the following research questions: What are the experiences of parents, children, and support workers with PBL in a summer reading program? How does scaffolding occur in PBL in a summer reading program? What are the perceived reading outcomes when PBL and scaffolding are combined in a summer reading program?

Literature Review

There are four areas that inform the current research that will be reviewed: (1) out-of-school reading interventions for children with LDs, (2) summer reading programs as a form of out-of-school reading interventions, (3) PBL as a pedagogical approach for elementary-aged children, and (4) scaffolding in reading instruction.

Out-of-school Reading Interventions

Reading is a fundamental life skill; not only is it critical for school success, but it is necessary for a variety of daily activities including following recipes, understanding road signs, and paying bills (Horowitz-Kraus et al., 2017). Reading has been argued to be one of the most

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important skills for both academic and life success (Wood et al., 2017). Although elementary schools invest a lot of time on reading instruction, many children struggle to achieve reading proficiency, and they may require several years of supplemental and intensive reading intervention to become proficient readers (O'Connor et al., 2014). Dyslexia is the most common reading disability. While dyslexia is assumed to have a neurobiological origin, both early identification and evidence-based intervention/ instruction can often prevent the formal diagnosis of a “disability” all together (Right to Read Inquiry Report, 2022). However, Ontario’s Right to Read Inquiry Report (2022) found that Ontario’s public education system is not using evidence-based approaches to teach children how to read, and this is disproportionately affecting students with RDs. Evidence-based interventions are necessary, and families sometimes seek reading interventions outside of the public school system.

Out-of-school reading interventions for elementary-aged children are evidence-based interventions that supplement rather than supplant the reading interventions that occur during the school day. Supplemental education is sometimes referred to as “shadow education,” as it is often a close parallel to the instruction and curriculum in public schools. It can be difficult to conduct research on supplemental education. Tutoring and instruction at learning centers are often private, unregulated, and not affiliated with the public education sector (Aurini et al., 2013). However, common evidence-based out-of-school reading interventions include computer-assisted instruction for individuals using high-quality computer programs (Chambers et al., 2008; Cullen et al., 2014; Savage et al., 2009), small group instruction in after-school settings (Krafnick et al., 2011; Roberts et al., 2018; Tamm et al., 2017), and one-to-one or two-to-one tutoring with an adult or professional (Bøg et al., 2021; Villiger et al., 2019). The consensus of current research on non-school reading interventions is that early intervention (i.e., before grade

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4) is the most effective strategy for improving the reading outcomes for children with reading disabilities (RDs) or difficulties (Gabrieli, 2009; Gilbert et al., 2013; Schatschneider & Torgesen, 2004). However, children with RDs and LDs are not the only population of children requiring additional support for reading instruction. Children with ADHD often need additional support as well, especially considering that children with ADHD often have comorbid RDs (Learning Disabilities Association of Canada, 2021). Research by Reed (2019) suggests that when children (grades 2 to 5) have comorbid ADHD/RD, each exceptionality needs to be addressed separately, using different approaches.

Community-based reading interventions are a common form of non-school reading intervention, especially for children of families from low-income neighbourhoods. Community-based reading interventions are characterized as reading interventions that are not offered in a hospital or school setting. Bayless et al. (2018) examined the effects of combining three common community-based after-school programs (ASP) on the reading skills of children in kindergarten to third grade. Participants received a structured literacy and reading intervention (3 times per week for 45 minutes), one-on-one tutoring (once per week for 45 minutes), and a choice-based book distribution program. ASP participants had better reading proficiency than the intent-to-treat comparison group. Other studies on community-based reading interventions reported similar gains in the reading proficiency of low-SES children following participation in the programs (Bowers & Schwarz, 2018; McDaniel et al., 2017). Overall, non-school reading programs involving small-group or individual instruction have therefore demonstrated their efficacy in improving reading skills among some elementary-aged children with reading difficulties and/or ADHD.

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Summer Reading Programs

Among the options for out-of-school reading interventions are summer reading programs. However, the research on summer programs to date has primarily focused on preventing the summer learning loss of children from low-SES backgrounds (Patton & Reschly, 2013; Schacter & Jo, 2005). Summer learning loss, which is also known as the summer learning slide, refers to the well-documented phenomena that low-income children make significantly smaller reading gains during their summer vacation when compared to their more economically advantaged counterparts. In Canada, summer vacation is the longest stretch of non-school time, and it appears to widen achievement gaps (Davies & Aurini, 2013). While summer reading programs exist to combat summer learning inequality, low enrollment and high attrition are common limitations of these programs (Denton et al, 2010; Schacter & Jo, 2005). Attrition is high and enrollment is low even when enrichment activities (e.g., sports, field trips, art activities) are offered within the reading programs (Denton et al., 2010). It is evident that there exists in-depth research on summer programs designed to mitigate summer learning loss. However, researchers such as Gershenson and Hayes (2017) and Verachtert et al. (2009) contend that the literature vastly ignores how summer learning opportunities may benefit children with LDs. While children with LDs are in fact participating in summer reading programs and experiencing greater gains than their mainstream counterparts, these children are often not the population of interest in studies exploring summer reading programs because the focus seems to be placed primarily on children from low-SES backgrounds (Gershenson & Hayes, 2017).

Reed et al. (2019) reported one of the only studies that has examined children with LDs in the summer context. They conducted research to examine the effects of a summer reading program for 470 children (K to grade 4) who had individual education plans and had a RD or

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were at risk for developing one. The program was offered for a total of 28 days during the children's summer vacation. The children received three hours of reading instruction per day, for a total of 84 hours. Reed et al. found that not all children are impacted the same way following a reading intervention. For example, while children generally benefitted from the program, only children in grades 1 and 4 showed improvements in reading ability and post-test gains on the five RAPID subscales, which was the outcome measure of interest.

Schacter and Jo (2005) evaluated the effectiveness of their summer program based on pre- to post-test reading improvement among children attending the summer intervention. Their study found that children who were in the summer day camp experienced gains in decoding and comprehension. However, the lack of a comparison group in this study makes it difficult to determine whether the gains were due to the reading intervention or natural progression. One potential strength of the Reed et al. (2019) study is that they attempted to control for the errors in Schacter and Jo by using propensity score analysis to estimate the causal effects of the reading program. Moreover, a control group was formed by eligible participants who were either not invited to participate in the intervention because of funding restraints, or eligible participants who chose not to attend.

Summer reading programs may take on many different forms. Some programs, for example, do not provide literacy instruction. Instead, they provide children with summer reading books that are matched to their reading level and interests (White et al., 2014). Other programs have provided additional support by training and encouraging parents to engage in at-home reading for at least five days a week (Knapp, 2016). The most common summer programs seem to be summer reading day camps, such as the interventions by Schacter and Jo (2005) and Reed et al. (2019). While some programs focus on specific literacy instruction (Beach & Philippakos,

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2021), other programs take a different approach by choosing not to teach specific reading skills. For example, Lara-Cinisomo et al. (2020) described a program that followed this approach. Their intervention took the form of a day camp, and 2.5 hours every day were dedicated to the reading program. This program included an opening activity to engage children with a book, a main activity to read and discuss the book, and finally a cooperative group activity. Reed and Aloe (2020) followed a similar format for their day camp; 2 hours every morning were devoted to reading instruction, and the afternoons were reserved for recreational activities such as field trips and crafts. However, their program taught specific reading skills by including time in the schedule for guided reading with a qualified teacher, independent reading, and interactive writing workshops. While not reading-specific, the Ontario summer learning project consisted of 3 weeks of full-day classes with one certified teacher and one teaching assistant (Aurini & Davies, 2013). This program also tried to promote an enjoyable ‘camp-like’ atmosphere by including a recreational component, as well as free healthy meals and snacks for the participants. In summary, there does not appear to be a single approach to summer reading programs; summer reading programs are very diverse in nature.

Play-Based Learning

While literacy day camps are a common type of summer reading program, many have themes of active learning or follow a play-based pedagogical approach to literacy learning (Beach et al., 2018; Johnston et al., 2015). PBL is a child-centered form of learning that unifies play and educational pedagogy. It focuses on the child’s academic, social, and emotional development (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). PBL can be described on a continuum that includes five types of play: (a) free play, (b) inquiry play, (c) collaborative play, (d) playful learning, and (e) learning through games (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). Here, free play is categorized by uninterrupted

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child-led play, while inquiry play is the process of expanding on the natural interests of a child that appear through play. Collaborative play occurs when teachers and children create a context of play together. Playful learning consists of prescribed activities that have playful elements. When “learning through games” is practised, children are intentionally learning academic content or skills (i.e., adding, subtracting, sight words, etc.) through teacher-created games that have explicit rules. Smilansky (1968) identified six categories of play by observing preschool children with low-SES in both the United States and Israel. In one of these categories, “games with rules,” children are expected to accept and conform to a set of pre-established rules. When children participate in the play-based modality of “learning through games,” they are participating in what Smilansky (1968) would call a “rule-bound game.” Burke (2019) believes that play is inherently social, and she argues that rule-bound games encourage negotiation and teambuilding. However, there is limited research on PBL and teamwork.

One PBL technique that is commonly used to support the language development of preschool children is Enhance Milieu Teaching (EMT). For example, McLeod et al. (2017) read books to participants (n=2) to introduce them to new words. Following the book reading with an interventionist, the participants were exposed to a variety of play materials that allowed the interventionist to prompt the use of the new vocabulary words. EMT shows promise because McLeod et al. found that both participants demonstrated unprompted use of all the target words during the follow-up play sessions.

Recent research suggests that PBL is an effective form of pedagogy, but the majority of research on PBL is focused on pre-kindergarten and kindergarten children (McLeod et al., 2017; Pelletier & Corter, 2019). No research on PBL to date has been conducted on children with RDs, LDs, or ADHD. In the Canadian context, the majority of the data on PBL in kindergarten is the

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result of a natural experiment that occurred when Ontario implemented a two-year play-based full-day kindergarten (FDK) program over the course of five years. With some children still enrolled in a half-day kindergarten program (HDK), researchers such as Pelletier and Corter (2019) were able to compare the longitudinal learning outcomes of children who participated in HDK and FDK. They found that there are long-term gains to FDK, as children in FDK performed better on five of the six outcome measures at the end of grade 2: self-regulation, reading, writing, vocabulary and number knowledge. Additional analysis examined the results of provincial test scores (i.e. measures of reading, writing, mathematics), and compared children from the FDK cohort to the HDK cohort. Children in FDK were more likely to exceed or achieve the provincial norms on this standardized test.

Summer reading programs, whether they are designed to minimize the summer learning slide or improve the reading outcomes of children with LDs, usually follow a well-known program or take a specific pedagogical approach. For example, Johnston et al. (2015) found positive gains from a summer reading program that included reading fluency research-based strategies (i.e., repeated reading, one-on-one reading, small and large group activities) and comprehension techniques (i.e., identifying the main idea, making connections to the text, and predicting future events in the story). Moreover, Reed et al. (2019) used Wonders (McGraw-Hill Education, 2017), and Christodoulou et al. (2017) used the program Seeing Stars by Lindamood-Bell. While many programs do not solely follow a play-based approach, there are themes of “learning through games” in many of them. For example, Beach et al. (2018) evaluated the effects of a 15-day summer reading intervention. The intervention consisted of 60-minute lessons on reading and spelling sounds, word reading and spelling, sight word reading and spelling, sentence reading and book reading. Teachers reviewed topics, as needed, using PBL techniques

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such as flash cards and games like memory match. In the summer intervention examined by Lara-Cinisomo et al. (2020), manipulatives were used in a small group setting. Johnston et al. (2015) also used components of a PBL pedagogy by teaching reading comprehension through science experiments where children had to follow step-by-step instructions, and reading games such as MadLibs, hangman, and word searches.

Teachers generally express positive feelings about the idea of PBL. However, in a study by Martlew et al. (2011), teachers identified that assessing learning was one challenge of using PBL. Martlew et al. explain that learning in a play-based setting is often independent, with the occasional support of the teacher, parent helpers, or classroom assistants. Furthermore, PBL in the classroom often takes the form of both whole-class activities and small-group activities. Children typically disengage from whole-class activities more easily, and more teacher scaffolding occurs in small-group activities. While education professionals often agree that play is a good way of socializing children, play in elementary schools is often limited to the playground and physical education classes. Parents and educators often put value on play in learning settings as long as it also explicitly focuses on school-based learning. Burke (2019) explains that while there is research that shows connections between play and skill development, parents and educators often struggle to see how learning gained through play is transferable to the classroom. In addition, while play is good for socialization and skill development, it does not always fit well within the structure of school and the expected behaviors of children in school.

Overall, research on PBL for elementary-aged children is limited, and there are potential barriers regarding learning assessments and evaluations. Despite this, PBL, more specifically the idea of 'learning through games,' is gaining popularity amongst elementary educators and parents, and there is an increasing market for card games, BINGO games, and board games that

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focus on academic learning, specifically math and literacy. These games are often readily available for purchase in stores. However, while PBL is predominant in the pre-kindergarten and kindergarten contexts, it does not seem to be used as the main pedagogical approach with elementary-aged children. Instead, themes of “learning through games” seem to be embedded throughout the elementary curriculum to support math and literacy learning (Burke, 2019). For example, elementary classrooms sometimes have literacy centres that allow for in-depth explorative play with language. Burke (2019) explains that a strict hierarchy of lesson plans is not the only way to develop language and literacy skills. Another way to develop reading skills is by immersing children in a rich environment where they are encouraged to explore and are rewarded for their efforts. A curriculum that infuses learning into play is another way of developing reading skills. Burke claims that when play is used to creatively encourage emergent literacy, scaffolding becomes important.

Scaffolding in Reading Instruction

Wood et al. (1976) describes scaffolding as teaching that works to transfer task responsibility from the tutor to the learner. Scaffolding is sometimes conceptualized as “contingent teaching,” because the help a tutor provides depends on a learner’s abilities; a tutor is expected to provide less help when the learner is successful, and more help when the learner is unsuccessful. According to Wood, scaffolding occurs in contingent tutoring when three conditions are present: temporal contingency (deciding when to provide help), instructional contingency (deciding how much help to provide), and domain contingency (deciding what to focus on). Outside of school-based reading interventions, scaffolding has been used in a variety of instructional contexts such as in classroom (Maloch, 2002), with small groups of students (Jadallah et al., 2011), and with student peers (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005). The current consensus in

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research is that scaffolding is associated with improved student learning (van de Pol & Elbers, 2013).

Scaffolding is a common instructional strategy when teaching elementary-aged children how to read. Taylor et al. (2000) have found that scaffolding children during reading is just as important for reading growth as teaching specific reading skills, such as decoding. However, scaffolding is typically present in reading interventions that occur during the school day (Spichtig et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2000), and it is common in school-based tutor- child dyads (Rodgers, 2004; Rodgers et al., 2016). It is especially present in early literacy interventions (McGee & Nelson, 2013). However, scaffolding has yet to be explored in the context of a summer reading program for children with RDs.

Summary

Overall, the benefits of non-school reading programs for children with RDs are well-documented. Summer reading programs that use small-group and individual instruction show promise for boosting reading skills, and PBL improves the early literacy skills and self-regulation of kindergarten children. In addition, scaffolding is an effective instructional strategy for school-based reading interventions. At this point, the research has been largely outcomes-based, and little is known about the experiences of elementary-aged children, their parents, and program facilitators with play-based summer programs that are designed to improve reading skills. There is a need for qualitative research to explore whether PBL and scaffolding, when combined in a summer reading program, can lead to the perceived maintenance or improvement of reading abilities.

Context

Reading Detectives vs. Reading Detectives Summer Club

Reading Detectives (Parr & Trudel, 2018) was established in 2007 and has since been offered in 2-hour blocks twice weekly throughout the academic year. This program was initiated by a non-profit community organization in Quebec, Canada that provides support and services to children and families living with ADHD. However, RD does not only support children with ADHD. While some children have ADHD, many have LDs (identified or unidentified), and other children simply have difficulty reading. The goal of the program is to increase motivation and self-esteem in literacy and to build literacy skills in a fun and interactive setting. Learning through games (i.e., PBL) has been the pedagogical approach of choice since the program's onset. The idea was that promoting a relaxed and interactive learning environment would engage both the children who were diagnosed with ADHD, and those who were struggling with the traditional standardized classroom approaches to education.

Between 2007 and 2015, many parents expressed concern over the limited options for summer day camps for their children. The local day camps provided programs to neurotypical francophone children. English-speaking families stated that their children, many of whom had not yet mastered the French language, had difficulty understanding the activities. Moreover, some of the children, specifically those with ADHD, autism spectrum disorder, or oppositional defiant disorder, had been suspended or expelled from the local day camps for perceived misbehaviors. In addition to these barriers to participating in the city day camps, parents also expressed the desire to have access to learning opportunities during the summer months. The Reading Detectives Summer Club (RDSC) was therefore established. Throughout this research,

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RD is used to refer to the afterschool program, and RDSC is used to refer to summer reading program.

RDSC Program Description

Although RDSC is designed to address the academic, social, and emotional learning needs of children with ADHD, the program has welcomed many children over the years, many of whom have diagnosed LDs or are reading and writing below their grade level. Group sizes for the program are limited to 12 children to maximize individual attention. Groups are established at the start of the summer based on grade level (see Table 1). Each group is led by a team of two to three staff members: one senior support worker and either one or two junior support workers or volunteers. The senior support worker is a cégep¹ or university student, and the junior support workers or volunteers are high school students from the local English public school. Staff members are often former RD or RDSC participants.

Place Table 1 about here

In 2019, the program ran for three days a week, Tuesday through Friday, for six weeks. In 2020, the frequency of the program remained the same, but the duration was extended from six weeks to eight weeks. In 2021, the program was offered for four days per week for six weeks. After one summer of following an eight-week format, RDSC returned to a six-week format to accommodate the mid-August start of cégep students. The lead educator, the first author of this paper, overlooks the daily programming of RDSC.

RDSC has been scheduled consistently from 8:45 am to 4:00 pm, with daycare services offered in the morning and afternoon based on the needs of the families. From approximately

¹ Cégep is a publicly funded college that offers a range of technical, academic, and vocational programs. Cégep is unique to Quebec's education system and upon graduation, provides students with a Diploma of College Studies. Quebec students require a Diploma of College Studies to apply to University in Quebec.

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10:15 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., children participate in reading and writing activities, many of which are play-based. Children have lunch and enjoy free play from 12:30 p.m. to 1:30 p.m. The afternoons (1:30 p.m. to 4:00 p.m.) are reserved for recreational activities such as trips to the public swimming pool or park, art activities, baking activities, or movies (see Table 2).

Place Table 2 about here

Play-Based Reading Activities

In the daily schedule, 75 minutes are dedicated towards the play-based reading activities (See Table 2). These reading activities follow a specific, pre-determined topic each week. Examples include sight words, homophones, synonyms/ antonyms, digraphs/ blends, short/long vowel sounds, and compound words. When parents register their children for RDSC, they are asked to identify areas for reading improvement. The topics covered each summer depend on the needs of the children registered. There is no formal assessment to identify needs or to monitor progress/ growth.

At the start of the 75-minute block, either the group's support worker or the lead educator provides a brief whole-group mini lesson of 8 to 10 minutes. Following this, the group is divided into sub-groups of 3 to 4 children. Play-based reading activities, known as centres, are prepared in concordance to the number of sub-groups. For example, if there are three sub-groups, there will be three centres. The sub-groups rotate centres every 15-20 minutes, and the centres are designed to practice the skill that was taught during the mini lesson (e.g., compound words). Each centre is supervised by a support worker or volunteer, who uses scaffolding techniques (i.e., modelling, task chunking, attention focusing, feedback, etc.) throughout the play-based reading activity. For example, the support worker might model a game where the children are required to build a block tower. One at a time, the children select a block at random and read the

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word that is written on the block (e.g., butterfly). They might be asked to identify the two words that yield the compound word (i.e., butter and fly), or the short vowel sound (i.e., ŭ). If needed, the support worker will either bring the child's attention to the word on the block, or to a specific part of the word. Moreover, they might offer feedback if the child misread the word. See Appendix A for descriptions of some of the play-based reading activities.

Theoretical Framework

Pedagogy in elementary schools is slowly moving away from standardized approaches to more active forms of education (Davis et al., 2015). With the emergence of the active learning approach, the image of the teacher standing in front of a classroom demonstrating, highlighting, and disseminating knowledge is becoming less common (Davis et al., 2015). In active learning, the teacher is viewed as a facilitator or scaffolder instead of as a didactic instructor (Martlew et al., 2011).

PBL is a form of active learning, and it is influenced by Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and his concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD describes the difference between what learners can do on their own, and what they can learn under the guidance of a facilitator or knowledgeable others in the learning environment (Vygotsky, 1978). When a learner is in the ZPD for a particular task, they can accomplish the task only with the appropriate assistance. The facilitator uses teaching strategies such as scaffolding, demonstration, reflection, discussion, case studies, and real-life examples to help the learner navigate the ZPD (Clapper, 2015). Scaffolding occurs when a facilitator or knowledgeable other acts as a supportive tool for learners as they develop their knowledge. A scaffold is meant to provide support and function as a tool, while also extending the range of the learner and allowing

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them to accomplish a task that they otherwise would not be able to accomplish. The learner only relies on a scaffold when it is needed (Ormrod, 2008).

As described by Taylor and Boyer (2020), “learning through games” is one of the ways in which PBL can be practised. Scaffolding plays an important role in this form of PBL. Vogt et al. (2018) discusses factors that educators need to consider when structuring learning opportunities through play. For example, the content and activity must stimulate both prior knowledge and continuous learning for the learner. Moreover, the content and activity need to fit the learners’ individual learning needs. The role of the educator is therefore very important, because PBL experiences require that educators observe, assess, and act on opportunities that extend the learners’ abilities (Taylor & Boyer, 2020). Thus, the ZPD plays a central role in PBL because educators are continuously scaffolding so that learners can build knowledge, experiences, and skills.

Scaffolding can take many forms. For example, the instructor can model the correct performance of a task, divide a complex task into smaller and more manageable tasks, or help keep a learner’s attention focused on specific aspects of a task. They can also help to keep a learner motivated to complete a task, remind the learner of their goals for the task, and provide frequent feedback (Ormrod, 2008).

At RDSC, scaffolding is the instructional strategy of choice. Children participate in reading activities that follow the “learning through games” approach of PBL outlined by Taylor and Boyer (2020), while the instructors, known as support workers, assist the children using a variety of scaffolding techniques. This method is based on the idea that PBL, when combined with scaffolding, will result in either the maintenance or the improvement of the reading abilities of elementary-aged children who have trouble reading (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Framework for Maintaining or Improving Reading Abilities in a Play-Based Summer Reading Program.



Methodology

This research followed a basic qualitative approach in which semi-structured interviews were used to understand the experiences of children, parents, and support workers who participated in RDSC between 2019 and 2021. We were interested in experiences relating to PBL, scaffolding, and the perceived maintenance or improvement of reading abilities. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain that the basic qualitative approach should be used when researchers are concerned with learning how participants interpret their experiences, and what meaning they attribute to those experiences. In most forms of qualitative research, data are collected through interviews (Merriam & Tisdall, 2016).

Recruitment

Eligible participants included the parents of children who attended the RDSC between 2019 and 2021, the children who were registered in the program, and support workers associated with the program over those years. These criteria resulted in three distinct groups of participants: (1) parents, (2) children with RDs, LDs, or ADHD, and (3) support workers.

Participants were recruited through the Facebook page and monthly newsletter of a community group located in Quebec. While participants were to be accepted on a first come first serve basis, only 15 individuals replied to the call for participants and 14 individuals consented

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to the interview. We expected to recruit between three and 6 participants for each group, for a maximum of 18 participants. To protect anonymity, participant names have been changed to pseudonyms and identifying factors have been removed.

Children, parents, and support workers affiliated with RD at the time of the study were excluded from the pool of participants to avoid potential conflict of interest. The voluntary nature of the research was clearly communicated to participants so that they did not feel coerced to contribute.

Data Collection

An interview protocol was developed based on the theoretical framework and research questions guiding the research. In addition to demographic questions, all three groups of participants were asked questions about the program, PBL, scaffolding, reading outcomes, and other outcomes (see Appendix C). Once the interview guide was developed, one support worker and one parent participated in a pilot interview as a means of field testing the questions (Merriam & Tisdall, 2016). Verbatim transcripts were produced and sent to each participant to provide an opportunity to make changes to their responses to ensure that the words accurately expressed their thoughts (Guest et al., 2012; Mero-Jaffe, 2011). There were no revisions to the transcripts. The first and second author reviewed the transcripts independently, and then met to compare notes and themes. Changes to the interview guide were subsequently made based on the data that emerged from the pilot interviews.

All participants partook in an in-depth semi-structured interview conducted via Zoom. Parents provided demographic information, and they were prompted to describe their experiences with RDSC. The purpose of the child interview was to glean information about their experiences with the reading program, play-based learning, and scaffolding activities. Support

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workers were also asked about their experience with RDSC. The focus of the support worker interviews was to understand exactly how scaffolding occurs during PBL. Verbatim transcripts were produced and general themes from the transcripts were sent to the participants for their approval. No changes to the themes were requested.

Data Analysis

The first step in the data analysis process was to read and re-read the transcripts. Notations were made in the margins of the transcripts about passages that were interesting, potentially relevant, or important to the study. Codes emerged through this process, and the codes merged into categories (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Through coding and categorizing, themes emerged for each group of participants. The data were analyzed independently by two of the authors. Tables were then created with themes that followed the theoretical framework, and subthemes that emerged from the transcripts.

Findings

The 14 interviews were analyzed individually and then compared independently by the first and second authors. The data were organized into six themes: role of support workers, PBL, scaffolding, perceived reading outcomes, friendship/ belonging, and program organization. While PBL, scaffolding, and perceived reading outcomes are themes that fit into the conceptual framework, role, friendship/ belonging, and organization are unexpected themes that emerged through data analysis.

Participant Characteristics

Fourteen participants were involved in the in-depth interviews: support workers (n=4; Kristina, Alexa, Maya, Michelle), parents (n=5; Hailey, Nicole, Jade, Samantha, Sophia), and children (n=5; Cassandra, Eva, Edward, Oriah, Vanessa). Support workers were affiliated with

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RDSC for an average of 2.75 years (range= 1-5 years). The support workers were between the ages of 24 and 26 at the time of the interviews and were post-secondary students (cégep or university) when they worked at RDSC (see Table 3).

Place Table 3 about here

The mean age for children at the time of this study was 10.8 years (range= 9-13 years). The term 'children' is used to refer to participants who were 12 years-old or younger when they participated in RDSC. Three children attended RDSC for 1 year, one child attended RDSC for 3 years, and one child attended 6 years (5 years as a participant, 1 year as a volunteer). Children attended RDSC for an average of 2.4 years, and they listed a variety of different reasons for attending (see Table 4).

Place Table 4 about here

All parents disclosed that their children had either LDs (suspected or confirmed) or general learning challenges. Common reasons for choosing RDSC was the desire to seek academic support, as well as prior participation in RD or familiarity with the participants and staff members (see Table 5).

Place Table 5 about here

Role of Support Workers: The Importance of Adapting and Collaborating

The support workers spoke highly of their role at RDSC. While their job description required them to facilitate the PBL reading activities, their responsibilities seemed to extend beyond this. In addition to facilitating, the support workers planned and adjusted the PBL reading activities, collaborated with their junior support workers/ volunteers, and helped the children with conflict resolution.

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Michelle and Kristina shared similar roles, as they planned the PBL reading activities for their respective groups, and both mentored and collaborated with either the junior support worker or volunteer that was assigned to their group. In Kristina's last summer at RDSC, her junior support worker was a first year cégep student while she was a fourth-year university student. Kristina had more experience and knowledge regarding children with exceptionalities (i.e., RDs, LDs, ADHD). Nonetheless, Kristina appreciated having the opportunity to "bounce ideas off of [her junior support worker] and make suggestions to support one another to make things run smoothly." Michelle's volunteer helped with the preparation and clean-up of the PBL activities. In doing so, this limited unstructured transition time for the children: "it just helped me make sure that transitions went smoothly, and there was no in between time for things to get chaotic."

All support workers spoke about how they adjusted the PBL reading activities to meet the needs of the children in their group. Kristina explained that she would make changes to the games when the group was not "feeling it." Meanwhile, Maya told of adjusting the rules when games were unfair. She would also shorten PBL activities if the children were struggling to maintain focus. Michelle stated that she created different variations of the high five PBL activity (see Appendix B). For example, she developed a variation that involved kicking the wall rather than hitting the wall because the children in her group enjoyed kicking and playing soccer. Alexa also spoke about the high five game and explained that it was important to match the energy level of the children with the energy requirement of the activities. For many support workers, flexibility was important. In addition to adapting the reading activities on the spot, being purposeful in the game selection was integral to managing the energy levels of the group. When planning centres, Kristina would balance high-energy games that involved running with more low-energy games that involved less movement and "more strategy." She also talked about the

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importance of "reading the room, reading everyone's energy level," because some days certain games were "just not the vibe." Similarly, Michelle spoke about the desire to be selective and purposeful when choosing PBL activities, and Alexa commented how when the children were too excitable, games like the high fives and the butterfly swat (Appendix A) "became less about the words and less about the reading, and more about just hitting as hard as possible."

Some of the games, such as the high fives and the butterfly swat, required splitting a group into teams. While the children had to collaborate within their respective teams, they also had to compete against the opposing side. Sometimes, the children would struggle to communicate and work with their in-group. Other times, rivalry between teams would lead to an outgroup bias. Conflict would arise, and consequently, all support workers described conflict resolution as a part of their role, but they took different approaches. Kristina explained her approach to conflict resolution: "We gave them tips, but we really tried to promote them helping one another, supporting if you saw someone struggling." Alexa also emphasized kindness and peer support amongst her group members: "We didn't tolerate any type of bullying or any type of negative comments towards the others, we always encouraged helping your classmate, and helping your fellow students." Meanwhile, Maya had a more systemic approach to conflict resolution. She described removing children from the group one at a time to hear the various perspectives on the conflict. Another strategy she used was reminding children of their choices during conflicts, such as walking away or ignoring the person. Michelle often used the calm down corner when she was helping children resolve conflicts. She spoke about how she modelled good emotional reactions by not becoming upset with the children and by not having "big emotional reactions" herself. Her hope was that by modelling appropriate reactions, the children themselves would show appropriate reactions during conflicts. Overall, PBL at RDSC

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presented many challenges, and support workers had individualized approaches to collaborating with colleagues, planning and adapting activities, and resolving conflict that arose from those activities.

PBL

Parents, support workers, and children all spoke positively about PBL, and they thought that the reading activities were fun. Two support workers (Michelle, Maya) and three parents (Jade, Sophia, Hailey) spoke about how learning was infused into play. Consequently, the children did not appear to be aware of their learning. For example, Jade explained that learning did not seem to be fun at school but that the children had fun with the PBL activities at RDSC, and they “didn’t know that they were learning but they were.” Maya spoke about what would happen if the game component of a reading activity did not work out as anticipated: “[the game] was us tricking them to read and if the game didn’t work, then [the children] wouldn’t want to read because to them it’s boring.” Overall, the active component of the PBL games appeared to motivate the children to participate in the literacy component of the reading activities.

For the children, another motivating factor seemed to be the competitive component of PBL. Cassandra explained that competition encourages her to push herself to improve: “I’m very competitive, I like trying to win or trying to get the most points.” Edward and Vanessa also enjoyed the competitive component of the PBL activities. Meanwhile, Alexa explained that the team-like nature of the games encouraged “healthy competition,” while also encouraging the children to build new relationships with their peers.

Support workers generally felt that the PBL activities encouraged teamwork. Michelle recalled noticing “stronger bonds” at the end of the summer between the children in her group. Maya believed that teamwork was fundamental to many of the PBL activities, explaining that

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"without teamwork, or collaboration, the game[s] didn't really go far." She described sock war (see Appendix B), where if the children were working separately instead of as a team, the socks would not be paired up correctly. Kristina also talked about sock war, explaining: "I think a lot of them helped each other... it was a team effort." She described how a sense of community was created, where stronger readers would automatically help struggling readers. Alexa shared this belief, explaining that the PBL activities taught the children about teamwork, and that "everyone tried to help each other out." Teamwork was even encouraged amongst support workers, as Maya and Michelle both spoke about how easy it was to access help in a judgement-free way. Overall, learning at RDSC was different compared to school learning; it was not individualized, as it often involved both competition and collaboration.

Perceived Helpfulness of PBL Reading Activities

Children and support workers were asked to name some of the reading activities that were particularly helpful for developing reading skills. Both groups of participants endorsed high fives and butterfly swat. Children generally struggled to recall specific reading activities, but Jenga was endorsed by Edward and Eva. Support workers were provided with a list of common reading activities, and this facilitated their recall. They recalled ping-pong toss, snap, sock war, scoot, zap and darts being particularly helpful and fun for the children (see Appendix A).

Scaffolding

All participants thought that scaffolding was helpful. However, support workers were the only group of participants who were able to explain exactly how scaffolding was used during the PBL activities. For example, all support workers described the following: (1) breaking the PBL reading activity into smaller, more manageable tasks, (2) demonstrating how to play a reading game, and (3) providing frequent feedback. Kristina and Maya described breaking the PBL

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activity into smaller, more manageable tasks during longer games, such as board games or sock war. Moreover, support workers generally believed that modelling the correct performance of a reading activity was important when an activity was first being introduced to a group of children. While feedback was an important strategy for all the support workers, Maya commented that feedback was often focused on behaviour and on teaching the reading skills, rather than on how to play the PBL activity. Feedback on the PBL activity was not necessary because in Maya's group, the children often came up with their own rules for the activities. The children in Michelle and Kristina's groups also had input in how to play the games. Consequently, their feedback was also based on the reading skills. For example, Michelle described positively reinforcing good behaviours and using feedback to "direct the conversation in ways to [encourage the children] to think about other ways to do what they're doing." For example, she would ask: "Can you think of another way to do that?" or "Do you want to ask a friend for some other ideas?"

Children did not know the term scaffolding, but they had a general idea of how the support workers helped them learn during the PBL activities. For example, Eva, Oriah, and Vanessa identified that the support workers explained the PBL activities, provided examples, and offered help and insight as needed. In addition, parents had a minimal understanding of how scaffolding occurred during RDSC, but they made general comments about scaffolding based on their observations of their children. For example, when asked whether she believed modelling the correct performance of a PBL activity was a good strategy for Edward, Jade replied:

100%. It's not related to Reading Detectives, but Edward plays hockey and I see him in practices, and he really needs to observe what's going on before doing it. So, I think for Edward, this strategy is one of the best for him.

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In summary, scaffolding was used to teach reading skills during the PBL activities. While parents and children understand that learning was done through play, they did not know a lot about the instructional strategies used during PBL. The support workers were able to identify how scaffolding was done.

Reading Outcomes

All participants agreed that there did not appear to be a summer learning loss because of RDSC. Parents, support workers, and children all believed that the children made progress in their reading, and that confidence and motivation in reading was developed.

Perceived Progress in Reading

Michelle explained that the children “made great strides remembering their letter sounds from week to week.” She described how by the end of the summer, the children in her group could sing the alphabet and say their letter sounds unassisted. Whereas Michelle would colour code her PBL activities early in the summer, she would remove the colour coding as the weeks progressed and the children were able to complete tasks by relying on the letters alone. Parents perceived improvements in their child’s reading as well.

For the children, reading progress generally meant learning to read and pronounce new words. Edward explained that “the games would just help you learn to say new words and how to read new words.” Cassandra also described that RDSC entailed “learning new words and what they mean,” and this sentiment was also endorsed by Eva. She noted improvement in her ability to read the words on standardized English tests when she returned to school in the Fall, because she was able to “understand the word meanings.” Edward also recalled self-improvement on standardized tests in September. He explained that his reading skills seemed “a lot better” at the

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end of the summer, and that he was able to recognize more words, which improved his reading level.

Although Vanessa speaks English at home, she explained that RDSC was her first experience formally learning English. She attended a French immersion school where the language of instruction was French from Kindergarten to grade 3. Both Vanessa and her mother, Hailey, felt that RDSC was a good introduction to learning English before Vanessa began grade 4.

Perceived Improvements in Confidence and Motivation to Read

Parents generally perceived that there was an improvement in their child's attitudes towards reading and confidence. For example, Nicole observed that Cassandra is now more motivated to read before bed: "I don't have to ask her to do that. She goes and does it on her own. So, she definitely is motivated to keep going with her reading even though it's still not always easy." Hailey made a similar comment, explaining that while she still struggles with getting Vanessa and Oriah to read before bed, the struggle has been minimized ever since the girls' participation in RDSC. Sophia explained that "Eva has a bigger interest in reading than she used to." Jade shared a similar sentiment following Joshua's participation in RDSC: "He reads very well, even the teacher tells me that he loves to read. And he reads by himself; he wants to read at home. He's asking for books." This newfound desire to read was also noted by support workers. For example, Kristina explained that the PBL activities helped the children "get more engaged with reading." She elaborated by saying: "I think some of [the children] would go home and find more enjoyment in reading on their own from the program." Maya supported this belief, recalling that some children lacked confidence at the beginning of the program, but throughout the summer they gained confidence: "Reading Detectives gave them the confidence to be able to

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at least try to read.” She also recalled many instances over the years where parents noted their child’s reading progress and improvements in their child’s motivation and confidence in reading. In sum, the children did not seem to experience a summer learning loss. On the contrary, the children, parents, and support workers all reported perceived gains in both their reading skills (improved vocabulary, improved pronunciation) and their confidence/ motivation to read.

Friendship and Belonging

Overall, the children expressed a sense of belonging at RDSC. Edward felt like he belonged because turn-taking was encouraged: “You wouldn’t be left out of anything, never excluded.” Cassandra shared the following sentiment: “I fit in because a lot of people there are like me.” Cassandra felt like she belonged because other children were “a little chaotic, and weird but in a good way,” like her. She noted similarities between her and two children who also have ADHD and described feeling “safe” because she knew that others would not “tease” her. There seemed to be a general theme of kindness, as Oriah and Vanessa both explained that they felt a sense of belonging because everyone at RDSC was nice and made sure that they had fun. All the children stated that they had friends at RDSC, who were usually other children who went to the same school as them. Eva explained that she first joined RDSC because she knew many of the children that were registered, and that she made new friends with children who attended the same school as her, who she would not have otherwise played with. Meanwhile, Oriah and Vanessa live in a neighbouring town and are therefore part of another school zone. When they joined RDSC, they did not know any of the other children. This seemed to provoke feelings of anxiety in Oriah. However, both girls said that they made friends quickly, and Vanessa even keeps in touch with one of her friends from RDSC.

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All support workers were committed to helping the children develop a sense of belongingness, but they sometimes took different approaches. For example, Kristina explained that she worked to create an emotionally safe space that was free of judgment. She took the time to identify the strengths of the children in her group. She emphasized active listening, “listen with your eyes, your ears, and your heart,” and kindness. Maya, Michelle, and Alexa also worked to create an emotionally safe space. However, Maya took a relationship-oriented approach by finding common ground with each of the children in her group: “I think that in order to create a safe space, you have to create relationships with the kids. You have to be able to take time to learn what they like and what they don’t like.”

Alexa and Michelle promoted belongingness through inclusion. Alexa explained, “We tried to include everyone in all the activities.” Alexa, like Kristina, also put emphasis on creating a space where the children were able to participate and try without the fear of judgement: “We didn’t tolerate any type of bullying or any type of negative comments towards the others, we always encouraged helping your classmate, and helping your fellow students.” Inclusion for Michelle was a little different; she described working to create a sense of community within her group by having everyone, support workers, volunteers, and children alike, eat their snacks together, play games together, and cheer each other on. She explained that during activities that required teamwork, she would mix the groups so that the children would have equal opportunity to work with everyone, rather than working with just their friends. Moreover, Michelle stated that she tried to minimize the power imbalance between her and her group, and in doing so she felt more like a facilitator than a teacher.

The support workers dedicated themselves to creating an emotionally safe space, and the children’s feelings of belongingness speak to the commitment of the support workers. This

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dynamic did not go unnoticed to parents. Overall, parents felt safe sending their children to RDSC, and they noted that their children were excited to attend. Jade explained that Edward “liked being a part of the Reading Detectives group,” and that he “felt comfortable to be around the workers and the kids.” She felt like there was “no judgement,” and that the support workers were patient and “treated [Edward] like he was a part of them.” Nicole also believed that the patience of the support workers was important in creating an emotionally safe space for Cassandra. Whereas Cassandra struggled with bullying and fitting in at school, she did not seem to experience these problems at RDSC. Eva also struggled socially at school, and Sophia was thrilled when Eva found her place at RDSC and was eager to go every day. Sophia explained that Eva “absolutely felt like she belonged there,” and that she was “more comfortable and confident to participate [at RDSC] than she had been at school.” This seemed to contribute to a sense of safety for Sophia when dropping Eva off in the morning. This sentiment was shared by other parents. For example, Samantha shared the following: “I know [Joshua’s] safe when he’s there. I know he’s surrounded by good people.” Moreover, Hailey “felt safe dropping [Oriah and Vanessa] off and leaving them there.” She noted that Oriah had a poor experience with another day camp the summer before attending RDSC. However, being at RDSC was completely different, and her daughter was sad when she missed a day of camp to celebrate her birthday. Overall, the children enjoyed attending RDSC, and they reported making friends and experiencing belongingness. Support workers seemed to actively work towards making the children feel like accepted members of the group, and parents were able to recognize that RDSC was an emotionally safe space for their children.

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Program Organization

Parents, support workers, and children all appreciated different aspects of how the RDSC was organized. Children and parents seemed to appreciate the recreational activities that were offered in the afternoons, and they generally believed that these activities complemented the morning activities. When asked about their best memory from RDSC, children recalled the afternoon activities. Cassandra and Oriah enjoyed the Olympics, an activity where all the age groups were merged into two teams for a day filled with various reading and athletic competitions. Eva expressed that she enjoyed the cooking and art activities. She also explained the following: “My best memory is probably when we went to the park, to the splash pad.” Edward fondly recalled activities that involved water balloons and explained that because he knew that there was something fun planned in the afternoon, he was more motivated to participate in the morning activities. Parents shared similar beliefs. For example, Samantha explained that learning is optimized by doing the “thinking games more in the morning, and the other games in the afternoon.” For her, the morning is the best time to learn. Sophia enjoyed the variety of afternoon activities that were offered. She said that prior to registering Eva for RDSC, her daughter was in a city day camp that had a lot of sports-oriented activities. It was not a good fit for Eva, as Sophia described her as “not the most physical person.” Instead, “she’s more creative, she’s more artistic. She’d rather do the activities you guys are doing, like sit down and learn something, or read something, or draw something.” When choosing a summer camp for Eva, Sophia struggled to find something that took this into consideration. She did not want to send Eva to a sports camp run by teenagers, or a summer school where the children sat and learned all day. For Sophia, RDSC was a “happy medium,” a “nice balance.”

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In addition to feeling like the format of RDSC was a good fit for Eva, Sophia also expressed that she liked that “it was a smaller group.” She compared RDSC to city day camps that often register hundreds of children. Several parents and support workers shared similar beliefs. For example, Hailey noted that the small group size really helped Oriah and Vanessa to get to know the other children, and it made the day camp feel “more intimate and more family-like.” Michelle described the small groups as a “luxury,” and explained that the small groups made it easy to monitor “everyone’s level of involvement and inclusion.” Meanwhile, Kristina felt like the small groups contributed to the increased confidence that some of the children experienced when reading out loud. Overall, the daily schedule and small-group format of RDSC seemed to be a highlight for parents, children, and support workers.

Discussion

Parents (n= 5), children (n= 5), and support workers (n= 4) who were affiliated with RDSC between 2019 and 2021 participated in semi-structured interviews. An interview guide was designed with the theoretical framework (see Figure 1) and research questions in mind. There were important findings relating to PBL, scaffolding, and reading outcomes. This is unsurprising considering that these were the constructs of interest in the theoretical framework. Novel findings included themes relating to the role of the support workers, the organization of the program, as well as friendship/ belonging. The data will now be used to answer the three research questions that guided the study.

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What are the experiences of parents, children, and support workers with PBL in a summer reading program?

Children were Unaware of their Learning

In this study, parents and support workers generally felt that because play was infused with education, the children were unaware of their learning. This is not the first time that parents have expressed this idea in research on PBL. O’Gorman and Ailwood (2019) looked at how parents discuss the place of play in the pre-kindergarten classroom and found that parents felt that their children were learning without realizing it. However, while the adults in our study seemed to think that the children were unaware of their learning, the children expressed no indication of this. The children who participated in this study appeared to want to learn, and two of the children even identified motives for learning when asked why they registered for RDSC. Children were also able to identify the skills they acquired at RDSC, as well as how they learned these skills. PBL seemed to be a hands-on alternative to passive classroom learning, and the hands-on approach is what made learning fun. Learning and ‘fun’ are often not linked in educational contexts. The adults in this study may have felt that the children were unaware of their learning because learning was closely connected to play, pleasure, friendships, and fun. While the children seemed to have fun while learning, they understood that learning was the goal of the PBL reading activities.

PBL Encouraged Movement, Competition and Teamwork

Parents, children, and support workers all believed that PBL was fun. Participants seemed to think that a good PBL activity included the following: (1) An active component that encouraged fun, (2) competition, and (3) teamwork. Support workers and children discussed the games they enjoyed, and both groups of participants spoke highly of high fives and butterfly

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swat. While these games are similar (see Appendix B), both activities seem to have all three components of a good PBL activity.

Children, especially the ones with ADHD (suspected or confirmed), liked that they were able to move while they learned. For some children, this seemed to help them learn. In the functional working memory model (Rapport et al., 2009) of hyperactivity in ADHD, there is a positive relationship between gross motor activity and attentive behaviour. Studies such as Sarver et al. (2015) have shown that movement in children with ADHD facilitates task-relevant arousal that supports phonological working memory processes. At RDSC, learning was done through movement, and this might have contributed to the perceived reading progress of children with ADHD.

Children enjoyed the competitive component of the PBL reading activities, and support workers seemed to think that teamwork was an outcome of PBL. It is not the first time that teamwork has been linked to PBL. The reading activities at RDSC are what Smilansky (1968) would refer to as rule-bound games. Rule-bound games, just like many other types of play, are inherently social and naturally encourage negotiation and teambuilding (Burke, 2019). At RDSC, the children had to cooperate to be successful with some of the PBL reading activities. Without cooperation, these activities were impossible to complete. It is likely that the nature of these PBL activities encouraged teamwork, and this is a topic that can be explored in future research.

Role of Support Workers: The Importance of Adapting and Collaborating

Considering that research on PBL has been centered around play in early childhood education, there is limited research available on PBL for elementary-aged children. However, one common theme in the literature on PBL for kindergarten and pre-kindergarten children is that practitioners are unsure about their role in PBL (Fung & Cheng, 2012; McInnes et al., 2011),

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and some studies have tried to conceptualize the role of teachers in play-based settings (Walsh et al., 2019). However, the support workers in this study had a clear understanding of their role. At RDSC, part of the support workers' role included planning PBL activities and collaborating with colleagues. When it came to their role during the PBL activities, support workers felt responsible for adjusting the PBL activities and encouraging conflict resolution. There seemed to be agreement among the support workers that when a game was not working for the group, it was important to either adapt the game or choose a new game. Consequently, adaptation and flexibility play important roles in successful PBL. This is the first time that this finding has been documented in the literature.

How does scaffolding occur in PBL in a summer reading program?

All participants in this study thought scaffolding was helpful, and support workers were able to identify how exactly scaffolding occurred during the PBL reading activities. Support workers identified that in PBL, scaffolding occurred through demonstration, feedback, and task chunking. It is not the first time that parents (O'Gormam & Ailwood, 2012) and practitioners (McInnes et al., 2011) have been asked about their views on PBL. However, to our knowledge, this is the first time that parents, support workers, and children have been asked to identify how scaffolding is used in PBL.

Overall, it is not surprising that the children found that the scaffolding of the support workers was helpful. Scaffolding is a common instructional strategy when teaching elementary-aged students how to read, and scaffolding children when they are learning how to read is just as helpful as teaching specific strategies like decoding (Taylor et al., 2000). In the past, research on scaffolding has primarily focused on school-based reading interventions (Spichtig et al., 2019; Taylor et al., 2000), and in tutor- child dyads (Rodgers, 2004; Rodgers et al., 2016; Wood et al.,

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2003). This is the first time that scaffolding has been identified as useful in a non-school reading intervention that takes a PBL approach to learning.

What are the perceived reading outcomes when PBL and scaffolding are combined in a summer reading program?

When PBL and scaffolding are combined, participants generally feel that there is no summer learning loss, that there is progress in reading, as well as gains in children's confidence and motivation to read.

No Summer Literacy Loss

Parents, support workers, and children felt that there was no summer literacy loss. Children generally reported perceived gains in literacy learning, and parents and support workers observed either maintenance or gains in reading outcomes. Summer learning loss is a well-documented phenomena in the United States (Graham et al., 2011; Kuhfeld, 2019; Menard & Wilson, 2014), and a more recently documented phenomena in Canada (Davies & Aurini, 2013). Studies such as Reed et al. (2019) have found that children with LDs and RDs can benefit from summer reading programs. The current study did not assess the reading progress of children across the summer or because of participation in the program. As such, explicit claims cannot be made about reading progress. However, perceptual findings are considered in relation to existing outcomes-focused research.

When summer reading interventions are offered as full-day program, they often include 2-3 hours of literacy instruction and time set aside for summer camp activities (Borman et al., 2009; Reed & Aloe, 2020; Schacter & Jo, 2005). Other reading interventions do not follow a day camp format. Instead, children receive 1-4 hours of explicit reading instruction before returning home (Beach & Philippakos, 2021; Beach et al., 2018; Christodoulou et al., 2017; Johnston et al.,

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2015; Reed et al., 2019). While some summer reading interventions might utilize play-based strategies such as reading games and manipulatives (Beach et al., 2018; Contesse et al., 2021; Johnston et al., 2015), the overall approach of these interventions are school-based. Some curriculums, such as the Sound Partners curriculum, has scripted lessons that focus the reading and spelling of sounds, words, sight words, and sentences (Beach et al., 2018; Beach & Philippakos, 2021). Other programs, such as the one described by Borman et al. (2009), provide literacy instruction through language and word studies, shared reading, interactive writing, guided reading, independent writing, and read a-louds. Children sometimes respond differently to summer reading interventions. For example, in Beach et al. (2018), grade 3 students had more reading improvements than grade 2 students. In Reed et al. (2019), grade 1 and 4 students experienced the best post-intervention effects. Moreover, children from low-SES homes and children with LDs and RDs typically benefit more from summer reading interventions than children who come from high-SES homes, or children who are typically developing. Despite this, the general finding is that children who participate in summer reading interventions do not experience any summer learning loss. Since many summer reading interventions utilize school-based approaches to learning, researchers may assume that school-based approaches are ideal for summer learning. However, in our study, parents, children, and support workers all agreed that there was no summer learning loss; they believed that reading skills were either maintained or improved when children went back to school at the end of the summer. These findings are similar to other studies, and it is interesting that no summer learning slide is perceived even when a strictly play-based pedagogical approach is used rather than a school-based approach.

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Perceived Reading Progress

Children, parents, and support workers all agreed that the children made progress in their reading. Children generally reported being able to read and pronounce new words and knowing more word definitions. This progress is in line with the results of other full-day, 6-week summer reading programs. For example, Borman et al. (2009) looked at the effects of a 6-week summer camp that was designed to improve the literacy skills of students transitioning from kindergarten to grade 1. They found treatment effects that were both practical and statistically significant on Developmental Reading Assessments and word list assessments. Similarly, Lara-Cinisomo et al. (2020) looked at the effects of a summer reading program for low-income and racial/ethnic minority children ranging from kindergarten to grade 8. Outcome scores (independent and frustration levels on the Basic Reading Inventory) improved significantly pre- and post-participation in the summer camp. Reading gains are usually seen in 6-week full-day summer reading programs. However, this is the first time that perceived reading gains have been reported in a 6-week summer reading program that takes a PBL approach to literacy learning.

Perceived Improvement in Confidence and Motivation to Read

Burke (2019) explains that when children learn within a culture that values literacy, they develop a desire to read. To encourage this type of culture, Burke suggests that classroom teachers craft reading and book-centered curriculums, regardless of the subject being taught. A love and appreciation for reading is embedded within the RDSC curriculum, and thus the culture of RDSC is one that values literacy. Keeping Burke (2019) in mind, it is natural that children who participate in RDSC develop a desire to read. However, confidence and motivation in reading is not something that is typically measured in research. Quantitative studies on out-of-school reading interventions, including summer reading interventions, generally measure

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improvements on standardized tests of reading (Beach & Philippakos, 2021; Beach et al., 2018; Contesse et al., 2021; Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2020). Children who participated in RDSC seemed to experience increases in their motivation to read and in their confidence in reading, but this does not appear to be something that has been studied previously.

Novel Themes that Emerged

The Children had Fun and Wanted to Participate

Overall, the children had fun at RDSC, and they were excited to attend. This is an important finding because studies such as Denton et al. (2010) have reported low enrollment and high attrition even when recreational activities (e.g., sports, field trips, art activities) are offered within the reading programs. While many summer reading programs have focused on the post-intervention gains, few have explored whether children, parents, and educators are satisfied with the programs. Borman et al. (2009) had children, parents, and educators complete satisfaction surveys at the end of their 6-week summer camp. Children were asked if they had fun, and 90% (n= 51) agreed. It should be noted that while children were asked if they had fun, fun seemed to be an important component of the program. Borman explains that the camp attempted to be an engaging program by using field trips, athletics, art, and science activities to foster a love of learning. Fun was also an important component of RDSC, and RDSC equally strived to be an engaging program.

Friendships and Belonging

Overall, the children felt like they belonged at RDSC, and they all appeared to have friendships within the program. Parents and support workers shared this sentiment. It is possible that the friendships and sense of belonging occurred because the games required teamwork, and because the support workers included everyone and ensured that RDSC was an emotionally safe

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space that was free from the judgement of peers. This is the first time that feelings of friendship and belongingness have been reported in a summer learning program for students with reading difficulties.

Program Organization

Participants generally appreciated that there were morning and afternoon activities, and that reading activities were in the morning. The format of RDSC is similar to other full-day summer reading programs (Borman et al., 2009, Denton et al., 2010). However, this finding extends on the current literature by describing that the format was enjoyed by parents, children, and support staff.

Parents and support workers appreciated the small-group format. For some parents, the small groups were a selling point for the program. Many summer reading interventions utilize small group instruction (Beach et al., 2018; Contesse et al., 2021; Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2020; Reed & Aloe, 2020), where groups range anywhere from four to 14 children. Small group instruction appears to be more common in summer reading programs that use PBL approaches to teaching and learning. For example, Beach et al. (2018) utilized small group instruction, and teachers reviewed lessons using flashcards and games like memory match. In addition, Contesse et al. (2021) combined whole-group and small-group instruction, and small-group lessons often used manipulatives for spelling activities. This appears to be the first time that small groups have been utilized in a summer reading intervention that takes a strictly play-based approach to reading intervention.

Contributions

The results of this research contribute greatly to the literature on teaching children with exceptionalities, PBL, and scaffolding in literacy intervention. In terms of teaching children with

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exceptionalities, this research adds to the functional working memory model (Rapport et al., 2009) of hyperactivity in ADHD. The perceived reading gains experienced by the children with ADHD in this study are in line with Rapport's model by suggesting that children with ADHD may benefit from having the opportunity to move and fidget while they learn.

Another new finding involves the difference in perceptions about learning being infused in play. While the support workers and parents felt that the children were unaware of their learning, the children seemed to fully grasp that learning was one of the main purposes of PBL. The contributions of children can be under-valued in research, but in this study, children and parents were strong informants. Whereas educators are usually the primary participants in research on summer reading programs, this examination informs methodology by suggesting that children and parents can also provide useful data.

In addition, the findings show that PBL may be an effective pedagogical approach in non-school reading programs. It is especially important knowing that children seek to have fun during the summer months, and that some summer reading programs have struggled with low enrollment and high attrition (Denton et al., 2010). Moreover, PBL seems to foster a love and sense of enjoyment in learning, and small groups appear to facilitate learning in non-school settings. While most of the research on PBL focuses on pre-kindergarten and kindergarten students, this is the first study that reports not only how PBL can be effective for elementary-aged students, but that it can lead to potential non-academic gains such as teamwork skills.

Finally, this research adds to the literature on the use of scaffolding and it is the first time it has been examined in a non-school setting using a play-based approach to literacy learning. Scaffolding, when combined with PBL, appears to lead to no summer learning loss, perceived progress in reading, and perceived gains in both children's confidence and motivation to read.

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While previous studies on reading in the context of the summer learning slide have taken an outcomes-based approach, this is the first study that focused on the experiences and perceptions of children, educators, and parents. Overall, the contributions to PBL and scaffolding speak to a larger contribution, which is a new way of conceptualising the teaching of reading skills. The conceptual framework driving this research (see Figure 1) offers a new way of examining reading.

Limitations

When interpreting the findings presented here, it must be noted that there are several limitations. Firstly, the participants were volunteers who all had positive experiences with RDSC. Secondly, the participants all had pre-existing relationships with the first author. Moreover, the perceived gains in reading progress, confidence, and motivation are discussed for a very small number of children ($n=5$). There is no information on how other children over the years have done in terms of their reading. Some children, support workers, and parents may not have participated in the study if they did not believe there were potential reading gains because of the program. These three limitations reflect a certain context and experience. Finally, this was a retrospective study, in which participants were separated from their participation in RDSC by up to 2 years.

Implications for Practice

Despite the potential limitations, this study provides several implications for the literacy learning of elementary-aged children with RDs, LDs, and ADHD. Firstly, there are implications for how literacy learning can occur in summer reading programs. A PBL approach can be used over a school-based approach, and children can have fun while learning. Learning does not have to be tedious or follow a school-based standardized approach to be effective. If a PBL approach

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is used in a summer reading program, it is important that small groups are utilized, and that competent support staff and volunteers are hired.

There are implications for practice in the elementary classroom. Teachers should incorporate PBL in their classroom practice to accommodate the movement needs of children with ADHD. Kinesthetic and tactile learning modalities can be utilized in the classroom. If teachers are looking to use PBL reading activities like the ones used in RDSC, they may consider setting up centers in the gymnasium, cafeteria, or schoolyard.

Finally, there are implications for peer tutoring. At RDSC, the more advanced readers often helped the less-skilled readers. In the classroom, children should be encouraged to participate in peer tutoring. However, for this to work as effectively as it did at RDSC, a positive learning environment needs to be established. The learning environment should encourage collaboration, helpfulness, and non-judgement so that the children are willing to try, knowing that they will not be teased for their mistakes.

Future Research

Future studies should use a quantitative approach to explore the effects of PBL and scaffolding on reading outcomes. Reading assessments should ideally be conducted at various timepoints (pre-intervention, post-intervention, 5 months post-interventions, 10 months post-intervention) to determine if gains in reading scores, confidence, motivation, and willingness to read are real, and if they continued in the following school year. A larger sample, which includes both an intervention group and a control group, would be necessary to do this. Currently, there is one RDSC group of 24-26 children that operates each summer. More RDSC groups would be needed to produce quality quantitative research.

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In future qualitative research, interviews should ideally be conducted both in June, prior to participation in RDSC, and in September, following participation in RDSC. These data could provide a more accurate picture of summer learning. Moreover, many children who participate in RDSC have IEPs, and therefore receive additional help from a resource teacher throughout the school year. In addition to interviewing parents, support workers, and children, resource teachers can be interviewed to achieve a more comprehensive perspective of the perceived reading outcomes that emerge consequently of RDSC. Alternatively, a mixed methods approach could be utilized by combining standardized reading tests with interviews.

Conclusion

This study was designed to explore whether PBL, when combined with scaffolding, results in either the maintenance or the improvement of reading outcomes. In this research, scaffolding seemed to be at the heart of gains in reading outcomes. Children tend to have fun with learning when it is easy, and the children in this study unanimously agreed that the play-based reading activities at RDSC were fun. After all, Maya explained that PBL was essentially a tool to get the children interested in reading, and if a game did not function as anticipated, then “[the children] wouldn’t want to read because to them it’s boring.” Through success with the play-based reading activities, the children seemed to learn how to read. The children were successful with the reading activities, and it was perhaps because the support workers scaffolded in a small-group setting that fostered a sense of camaraderie. The findings of this study point to the importance of the use of PBL and scaffolding strategies combined with the creation of a sense of belonging and psychological and emotional comfort to inform the practice of teaching reading skills in school and non-school settings.

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Appendix A

Examples of Play-Based Reading Activities

High Fives

Hand templates with homophones, phonemes, or sight words are placed on a wall. The group is divided into two teams. For phonemes and sight words, the support worker says either a word or phoneme, and one member from each team races to the wall to hit the corresponding hand. For homophones, the support worker reads a sentence (e.g., The girls love to bring their dog to the park), and one member from each team races to the wall to hit the correct homophone (options include their, there, and they're). Points are sometimes awarded to the first team that gets the correct answer.

Butterfly Swat

Butterfly templates with phonemes, sight words, or words with long vowel sounds (i.e., bite), are placed on a wall. The group is divided into two teams, and each team is given a fly swatter. The support worker says a word or phoneme, and one member from each group races to the wall to hit the butterfly that corresponds with what the support worker said. Points are sometimes awarded to the first team that gets the correct answer.

Ping-Pong Toss

Plastic cups are labelled with word family endings (e.g., -ing, -og, -ig, -et, etc.), and ping pong balls are labelled with words that belong to the word families indicated on the cups (e.g., sing, fog, big, jet, etc.) Children must choose a ping pong ball at random, read the word on the ball, and attempt to toss it into the corresponding cup.

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Sock War

Compound words are written on pairs of socks. Each sock in the pair has a part of the compound word. For example, one sock reads butter and the other sock reads fly. The group is separated into two teams, and the room is separated in half using a piece of masking tape on the floor. Each team is given 10 plastic cups, which are placed on a table on their side of the room. The pairs of socks are separated, and the individual socks are folded into themselves so that they can be easily thrown. In the first part of the game, both teams throw the socks in attempt to knock the other teams' cups down. Once both teams have their cups knocked over, the teams work together to pair the socks and match the compound words.

Word UNO

Word UNO follows the same rules as regular UNO, but the game is modified to incorporate verbs instead of numbers. Instead of stacking different colored cards with the same number, players can stack different colored cards with words that have the same first letter.

Scoot

Children sit cross-legged at one end of the room. One at a time, they are asked to either spell a word or answer a grammar question. If the child responds correctly, they get to scoot forward one time. The first child to cross the designated finish line wins.

Zap

Nouns, verbs, and adjectives are written on over 100 popsicle sticks. Some popsicle sticks contain the word zap. One at a time, the children roll a dice. If the dice lands on a 6, they choose 6 popsicle sticks at random from the pile. If a child reads the word on the popsicle stick correctly, they keep it as a point. If they make a mistake, they put the popsicle stick back into the

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pile. If a child picks a zap, they keep the zap and they read the rest of their words before adding them back to the pile.

Darts

This game is played with a fabric dart board and foam balls that have hook-and-loop fasteners. Sight words cover the various number targets on the dart board and are attached hook-and-loop fasteners (e.g., 100 points for the small center target, 10 points for the largest, outer-most targets). One at a time, the children throw the foam balls at the dart board. If the foam ball lands on the same target as the sight word, the child reads the sight word. If the sight word is read correctly, the child keeps the sight word and earns points. If the sight word is read incorrectly, the word remains on the dart board and the child does not earn any points.

Snap

Green cards with word family endings (e.g., -ing, -og, -ig, -et, etc.) are placed upside down in the center of the playing area. Children are dealt 5 red cards that have either letters, digraphs (e.g., /sh/, /kn/, /ph/), or blends (e.g., /bl/, /sk/, /gr/). One at a time, the green cards are flipped over. The first child to play a red card that forms a word when combined with the green card (e.g., /bl/ + /ing/ → bling) gets to keep the green card as a point. Before another green card is flipped over, all players must make sure they have 5 cards in their hands. The game ends when at least one child has made three correct words.

Jenga

Words or phonemes are written on Jenga blocks using a permanent marker. The Jenga tower is created. One at a time, the children pull out a block and read the word or phoneme that is written on the block. Once they read the word, they place the block on the top of the tower. The game restarts when the tower falls.

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Appendix B

Table 1

Groups at RDSC

Group Name	Grades
Little Group	Grade 1, Grade 2
Middle Group	Grade 3, Grade 4
Older Group	Grade 5, Grade 6

Table 2

Typical Daily Schedule for RDSC

Start Time	Description
8:45 a.m.	Arrival
9:00 a.m.	Circle time (greetings, feelings check-in, meditation & mindfulness, cooperative group game)
9:45 a.m.	Brain Power (i.e., executive function activities such as puzzles, strategy games, word searches, etc.),
10:15 a.m.	Book Clubs (i.e., read aloud or paired reading)
10:45 a.m.	Free Play & Snacks
11:15 a.m.	Play-Based Reading Activities
12:30 p.m.	Lunch
1:30 p.m.	Afternoon Activity
4:00 p.m.	Departure

Table 3

Characteristics of Support Workers

Name	Age	Age group	Reasons for applying	Summers worked
Michelle	26	Little Group (Grades 1-2)	Was studying to become a teacher and thought the position was a good opportunity.	2019, 2020
Maya	24	Middle Group (Grades 3-4)	Had volunteered for Reading Detectives and was offered a paid position for RDSC.	2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019
Kristina	26	Older Group	Had worked for Reading Detectives and was offered the position for RDSC.	2018, 2019, 2020

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		(Grades 5-6)	Enjoyed working with children.	
Alexa	25	Middle Group (Grades 3-4)	Arrived as a replacement 2 weeks after the program started. Worked for 6 weeks.	2020

Table 4

Characteristics of Children

Name	Age	Current Grade	Reasons for enrolling	Summers attended
Cassandra	11	6	Was enrolled in Reading Detectives, and her mother suggested enrolling for RDSC.	2019, 2020, 2021
Edward	13	8	Liked the staff at RDSC better than at the city camp. Felt like he would learn more at RDSC than at the city camp.	2015- 2019 (participant), 2020 (volunteer)
Eva	11	5	Knew and trusted the person who ran RDSC. Had friends who were registered. Enjoyed reading and writing.	2021
Oriah	10	4	Knew the person who ran RDSC. Thought it was going to be fun.	2021
Vanessa	9	3	Chose to attend. Sister was attending.	2021

Table 5

Highlights from Parent Interviews

Name	Parent of	Child's diagnosis/ challenges	Reasons for enrolling
Nicole	Cassandra	Undiagnosed ADHD and dyslexia. Has an IEP since grade 2. Dyslexia runs in the family	Recommended by teacher at school. Seeking outside help for reading, writing, and social skills.

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Samantha	Joshua	Had difficulties with fluency and comprehension in grade 2. Does not have a diagnosed disability but displays symptoms of ADHD (hyperactivity).	He went to Reading Detectives and it seemed to improve his reading, so he registered for RDSC. Sister and cousins participated in Reading Detectives and RDSC. Was seeking a summer camp with an educational component.
Jade	Edward	Diagnosed with ADHD in grade 1. Had difficulty learning words and syllables in kindergarten and was behind in grade 2.	Sister attended Reading Detectives and RDSC. Looking to improve comprehension and vocabulary in English, and comprehension for math word problems.
Sophia	Eva	No official diagnosis, but teacher suggested to have her assessed for ADHD because she was having trouble focusing. Struggled at school with confidence, reading comprehension in math and English, being left out and bullying.	Participated in Reading Detectives and enjoyed it. Had attended a large-scale city day camp the previous year and sought a day camp with smaller groups and an educational component.
Hailey	Oriah (and Vanessa)	Diagnosed with dyslexia this year.	Reading behind grade level. Wanted her to be motivated to read independent, to learn while having fun, and to not be forced to read.
Hailey	Vanessa (and Oriah)	Suspected ADHD- will be assessed in June. Struggles with homework. Struggles in social settings.	Was in French immersion from kindergarten to grade 2, so she struggled to read in English. Wanted her to be motivated to read independent, to learn while having fun, and to not be forced to read.

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Appendix C

Questions for Parent Interview

1. What is your child's gender identity?
2. How old is your child?
3. What grade is your child currently in?
4. Which summers did your child attend the Reading Detectives Summer Club? (2019, 2020, 2021).
 - a. How old was your child the first time they came to the Summer Club?
 - b. What grade was your child in when they first came to the Summer Club?
5. Did your child have difficulty learning to read when they first registered for the Summer Club?
6. Does your child have an identified, or suspected disability? If yes, what is the disability/disabilities?
7. How did you hear about the Summer Club?
8. What made you decide to register your child in the Summer Club?
9. When you first registered your child for the Summer Club, what reading skills were you hoping for them to develop?
 - a. Have these goals changed since then?
10. Tell me what you know about the reading part of the program (i.e., mornings).
 - a. What were your child's favorite activities in the reading part of the program? Why?
 - b. What were your child's least favorite activities in the reading part of the program? Why?
 - c. What parts of the reading portion of the program were most beneficial for your child? Why?
11. How do you feel about the play-based approach to literacy learning that is used in the summer reading program? Why?
12. What strategies used by the staff during the play-based reading activities seemed to help your child the most? Examples of strategies include: (1) Modelling the correct performance of a reading game, (2) Breaking the reading game into smaller, more manageable tasks, (3) Focusing specifically on the

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reading component of the game, (4) Providing frequent feedback, (5) Using the active component of the game to keep the child motivated for the reading portion.

a. Are there any strategies that were not mentioned that you think might help your child?

13. Has the Summer Club improved your child's motivation to read, or their attitudes toward reading?

Give an example.

14. Did the program help to maintain your child's reading skills over the summer? Why do you think this happened?

15. How has the Summer Club helped your child in reading the following school year?

16. Did play-based learning seem to promote teamwork or cooperation for your child? Explain.

17. Did your child develop any friendships by participating in the Summer Club? Explain.

18. Do you think your child had a sense of belongingness in the Summer Club? Explain.

19. Do you think the Summer Club is an emotionally safe space for your child? Explain

20. Will you enrol your child in the Summer Club next year? Why or why not?

21. Do you have any final comments on the summer reading program?

Questions for Child Interview

1. How old are you?

a. What grade are you in?

2. How old were you when you first came to the Summer Club?

a. What grade were you in when you first came to the Summer Club?

3. Why did you sign up for the Summer Club?

4. Tell me what you remember about the reading part of the program (i.e., mornings).

a. What were your favorite activities in the mornings? Why?

b. What were your least favorite activities in the mornings? Why?

5. What is your best memory from the Summer Club?

6. Did you make any friends in the Summer Club?

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- a. If so, are you still friends with these people?
- b. Did you feel like you belonged or “fit in” when you participated in the Summer Club?
7. Do you think the Summer Club helped you learn more about your emotions, and how to manage them?
 - a. Potential probes:
 - i. Do you still use the Fuzzies when you identify your emotions?
8. Give me an example of a reading game you played.
 - a. Did you enjoy this game?
 - b. Do you think games like this helped you learn?
9. Tell me about the support workers and volunteers.
 - a. How did they help you during the reading games?
 - b. How did this help you to learn?
10. After being in the Summer Club, how did you feel about starting school in the fall? Why?
11. Did your reading skills seem to be better? Why?
12. Do you think that other children should go to the Summer Club? Why?
13. Is there anything else you would like to say about the Summer Club?

Questions for Support Worker Interview

1. How old are you?
2. How many years were you involved with the Reading Detectives Summer Club?
 - a. How old were you when you first started coming to the Summer Club?
 - b. When you first joined the Summer Club, were you a participant, a volunteer, or support worker?
3. Why did you become a volunteer/support worker?
4. How did you get involved with the Summer Club?
5. Tell me about the morning activities in the Summer Club.

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- a. What did you do as a volunteer/support worker during the morning activities?
 - b. What did you **like** about the morning activities? Why?
 - c. What did you **dislike** about the morning activities? Why?
6. The play-based reading games were a central part of the morning activities. Here is a list of some of the common reading games that were used. Which of these activities were particularly helpful in helping the children learn to read? Why do you think they were helpful?
7. I am going to list a few scaffolding strategies. The strategies are: (1) Modelling the correct performance of a reading game, (2) Breaking the reading game into smaller, more manageable tasks, (3) Focusing specifically on the reading component of the game, (4) Providing frequent feedback, (5) Using the active component of the game to keep the child motivated for the reading portion.
- a. Can you tell me if any of these strategies were particularly helpful during the play-based reading activities?
 - i. Did you use any other strategies during the play-based reading activities that I did not mention? If so, what were they?
8. What are you trying to achieve when you guide the children through a play-based reading activity?
9. Tell me about a time when a reading activity did not turn out as expected. Why do you think it was not successful?
10. How did play-based learning promote teamwork or cooperation among the children?
11. What do you think some of the program reading outcomes are?
- a. Potential probes:
 - i. Do you think some children moved up in their reading level? Why?
 - ii. Do you think some children became more confident in their ability to read?
 - iii. Do you think that some children started to be more motivated to read?
12. Give an example of a time you successfully taught a child a skill. It does not have to be a reading skill. Why do you think this was successful?

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13. How did you help to create an emotionally safe space for the children in the Summer Club?
 - a. How did you help the children develop a sense of belongingness within the group?
14. How did you help the children develop social and emotional skills (e.g., emotional and behavioral regulation, conflict resolution)?
15. How did you help the children develop friendships?
16. Is there anything else you would like to say about the Summer Club?