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Examining the Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools Model on Middle School Students' Reading Achievement

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The Children's Defense Fund (CDF) is a national organization dedicated to child advocacy through policy, action, and education. Established in 1973 under the leadership of Marian Wright Edelman, CDF was birthed from the Civil Rights Movement and continues to serve children by improving equity and access around issues such as poverty, healthcare, early childhood programs, welfare, youth justice, and gun violence. One of the most notable programs hosted by CDF is Freedom Schools (FS). In this six-week summer program hosted at more than 100 sites across the nation and available to students in grades K-12, FS provides academic enrichment through a research-based, culturally relevant curriculum through the utilization of multicultural literature. Each year, CDF provides educational units using culturally relevant and developmentally appropriate literature, developed around individual and collective themes of making a difference. In addition, the program fosters character-building enrichment, parent and family involvement, civic engagement and social action, intergenerational leadership development, and nutrition and health, amongst program participants and leaders.

One of the most notable differences that FS offers, both historically and contemporarily ad in comparison to instruction offered in traditional schools, is increased access to culturally relevant curriculum and critical literacy. Ladson-Billings (1994) and Gay (2000) advocated for culturally relevant and responsive

teaching in light of today's subpar educational conditions. In the midst of standardized assessments, high-stakes testing, and streamlined curriculum standards, modifying pedagogy to adapt to students is important. In literacy, this role is especially important (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994). In order for students to be successful learners, the connection between textbooks, stories, and curricula must be multicultural, reflexive, and critical (Freire, 2000; Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Nieto, 1992). By exposing students to critical information, students can make vital connections between education and social problems. In the most organic sense, education becomes a tool for critical inquiry and questioning. Through literacy, students must examine issues of equality—political, economic, racial, gender/sexuality, religious, and so forth—as they did in the 1964 Freedom School summer (Hale, 2007, 2011; Kumaravadivelu, 2012). Teachers of the original FS acknowledged that education played a direct role in citizenship (Hale, 2011; Ransby, 2003). Thus, lessons and discussions centered on equipping students to be more knowledgeable on critical (and sometimes controversial) issues.

However, researchers need to continue to examine the academic impact of FS for students, as limited existent literature specifically highlights academic gains of middle school students as a result of participation in the program. Additionally, literature has revealed that the exposure to and utilization of multicultural texts has increased reading outcomes amongst diverse student populations. As such, the purpose of this study was to examine the impact of the program on urban middle school students' reading achievement, specifically in reading fluency and comprehension, regarding three iterations of the program over a three-year time span. The research questions for this study were:

- 1) How did Freedom School students increase their *independent* fluency reading levels, as measured by BRI?
- 2) How did Freedom School students increase their *instructional* fluency reading levels, as measured by BRI?
- 3) How did Freedom School students' sight word analysis, in-text word recognition, and comprehension questioning improve overall, as determined by pre- and post-assessment ratings?

Review of Literature

FS Impact on Student Reading Outcomes

To date, three evaluative studies have been conducted to examine the FS model on student reading achievement. Philliber Research Associates (PRA; 2008) conducted a comparative study to examine FS's influence on 1) students, 2) parents' engagement, 3) staff's leadership development, and 4) churches in the model. Over a three-year period, K–8 students from the Kansas City FS Initiative ($n = 2,741$) and area churches ($n = 522$) were pre- and post-assessed using Group Reading Assessment and Diagnostic Evaluations (GRADE). As developed by Williams et al. (no date), GRADE is “a normative diagnostic reading assessment that determines what developmental skills students have mastered and where they need instruction or intervention” (p. 2). Researchers found that on average FS participants increased their reading abilities by at least two months, whereas students in the comparison groups did not (statistically insignificant gain). In particular, findings revealed that FS students in middle school (grades 6–8) experienced the greatest gains versus their counterparts who actually declined in their reading outcomes. Also noted, girls, students from lower income families, and those attending

for multiple years had demonstrative growth. Other findings of the study supported the notions that 1) FS increases parent involvement and engagement, 2) the program encourages intergenerational leadership development, and (3) church organizations are supportive and see the benefits of participation through youth summer enrichment program offerings and congregation growth.

PRA's (2008) findings are methodologically strong and valid when considering the sample size and the disaggregation of data that typifies those who would academically benefit from FS program participation. However, the significantly smaller comparison sample and lack of discussion on program returners (and how this influenced the data) provide implications for further study. Still, the findings were amongst the first in demonstrating how FS can positively impact reading outcomes for youth, specifically those from low-income backgrounds. In addition, since GRADE targeted areas for intervention and provided instructional suggestions, findings could have been returned to participants' families and used as an academic resource when returning to school.

The second evaluation study was that of Portwood et al. (2009) who conducted a pretest/posttest single group design for elementary and middle grade students ($n = 51$) using the Basic Reading Inventory (BRI) assessment (Johns, 2005) to measure reading achievement, motivation, and attitudes about FS participation. The BRI utilizes sight word analysis, reading passages, and comprehension questions to evaluate students' independent, instructional, and frustration reading levels (Johns, 2005). This assessment has been widely used and recognized as a tool for measuring student fluency and comprehension. With this assessment, researchers found that 57% of

program participants increased their reading ability, while 29% maintained literacy skills. In terms of reading motivation, their findings proved to be statistically insignificant, but an overall increase in connectedness to school and reading was noted. Other findings revealed that a majority of students enjoyed the program, felt it to be an impactful experience, and expressed intent to return in subsequent summers. This study, too, provided valuable insights about the effectiveness of the FS model, in particular, with the utilization of the BRI as the measure. However, the research was limited in lack of specificity regarding reading levels and student grade levels.

Another study by Taylor et al. (2010) investigated the impact of FS on K–8 students ($n = 132$) by measuring independent and frustration reading levels using the BRI assessment. From the sample, researchers found that 50% of participants increased their independent reading abilities, whereas 39% remained the same. In particular, students in grades 6–8 had the largest gains, demonstrating 1.5 year's growth as a result of participation in the program. When examining frustration levels, findings revealed that over 65% of students showed improvement by increasing the grade level in which content became “too hard” and 25% remained the same. Researchers noted that participants in grades 3–5 demonstrated the most growth where data showed that on average, students reached reading difficulty above grade level 6 content.

Findings from PRA (2008), Portwood et al. (2009), and Taylor et al. (2010) support the notion that FS participation and positive reading outcomes for students are correlated; however, it should be noted that all studies were done as evaluative studies for the organizing entities. The goal of this study was to extend the research on FS as a

reading intervention model which could be used by schools and community organizations, in particular where there are high concentrations of youth who: 1) have limited access to quality academic enrichment programming during the summer; 2) experience reading difficulties or are lacking motivation towards reading; and/or 3) are from low-income backgrounds that limit out-of-school academic opportunities.

Other studies on FS have revealed that students developed psychosocially (Bethea, 2012), and gained social consciousness through civic participation (Jackson, 2011), social responsibility through researching root causes of societal problems (Payne, 2003), and collective work and responsibility (Jackson, 2009). Smith (2010) found that the model also fostered regimes of truth, and Howard (2016) noted that FS promoted dialogues centered on educational equity for minoritized youth. In addition, FS research extends to pre-service teacher education where researchers have found its relevance in providing culturally responsive teaching practices (Knofski, 2020), transfer of instructional practices into the classroom (Stanford, 2017), and as an educator preparedness model (Jackson, 2006).

Culturally Responsive Teaching and Utilization of Multicultural Literature

The necessity for multicultural education practices in public schools has become vital as today's classrooms represent the greatest ever numbers of racially and culturally diverse students (Banks, 1993). In turn, culturally responsive teaching (CRT) recognizes the importance of a student's culture in all aspects of learning and should mirror the academic, social, and cultural needs of an ever-increasing population of diverse students.

Gay (2000) defined CRT as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them” (p. 29). Gay (2000) further explained that CRT is validating and affirming for students, comprehensive in learning development, multidimensional in the education experience, empowering, transformative, and emancipatory. To elaborate, culturally responsive teaching provides positive perspectives about parents and family members, communicates high expectations of the student, provides learning opportunities within the context of culture that is student-centered, and actively works towards reshaping the curriculum, culturally mediating the instruction, and having the teacher serve as a facilitator in the educational experience (Ladson-Billings, 1994). The use of picture books and young adult novels that mimic the experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse students is a tangible means for increasing cultural competency in the classroom while also reducing fear and prejudices towards others who are different (Gay, 2000).

The utilization of multicultural literature becomes a vehicle for promoting social justice, equity, and inclusion in these diverse academic spaces. According to Harper and Trostle-Brand (2010), benefits to having this type of resource in classrooms are many: (1) students visually see more representations of themselves presented in the literature and, as a result, become more empowered in the classroom; (2) students become more engaged and motivated, thereby increasing student academic outcomes; and (3) the classroom disrupts mainstream ideologies and narratives presented in traditional literary canons. Other studies point to multicultural literature as a means to affirm students’ social and cultural identities and to increase their

understanding of the world around them (Osorio, 2018).

One example of utilizing multicultural literature in curriculum is the Children’s Defense Fund (CDF) Freedom School national program. Established in the 1990s as a six-week summer literacy program, CDF Freedom Schools provides academic enrichment to low- and middle-class K–12 students through culturally relevant and developmentally appropriate literature. Using the varied readings—some of which are biographical sketches of historical change agents—participants are empowered to make a difference in themselves, their communities, and the world, through reading. In addition to the reading curriculum, students participate in a National Day of Social Action where they conduct research on a pertinent social issue, such as child hunger, gun safety, or bullying, and then develop an action plan to become civically engaged. According to Westheimer and Kahne (2004), by participating in these social justice-oriented activities, students can positively impact change in society.

Additional studies have investigated how the use of culturally relevant texts influences learning and serves as a foundation for building literacy. Bui and Fagan (2013) conducted a study that applied multicultural texts as a context for reading comprehension, where findings revealed that the word recognition, reading comprehension, and story retell of the treatment group (which used multicultural literature in their instruction) increased significantly—as developed from the integration of multicultural literature. The use of multicultural literature provided beneficial dialogue and other increased learning outcomes for the students who participated in the treatment. Another study by Hefflin (2002), which centered on the use of African American children’s literature for K–8 in an urban school, revealed that

student engagement in culturally relevant lessons was heightened due to the connection between the text, the lesson, and the students' cultural backgrounds. These findings support the notion that multicultural literature has the power to transform traditional classrooms into spaces that are engaging, inviting, critically reflective, and socially conscious in order to enact societal change.

Summer Learning Loss Epidemic

Commonly, U.S. public school districts maintain at least 180 days of academic instruction from August through May; as a result, school becomes an (unfavorable) option for many students during the summer months of June and July (Alexander et al., 2007). With the traditional summer break lasting 60 days or longer, all students are at risk of losing content if it is not being reinforced through some type of summer academic intervention. Even when students return to school, if they have not been exposed to some type of academic enrichment during the summer break, they could be disadvantaged because their peers who received such support will keep progressing academically. This process is often referred to as *summer slide*, *summer setback*, or *summer learning loss* (Allington et al., 2010).

Research has found that students from low-income backgrounds or from urban and/or rural communities are at even greater risk of summer learning loss because of their minimal access to academic enrichment programs (Alexander et al., 2016; Quinn et al., 2016). Allington (2010) reported that students can lose six to nine months of classroom instruction when not engaged in academically rigorous programming during the summer. While students from low socioeconomic backgrounds experience a lack of academic growth over the summer,

their suburban or middle-class counterparts who have opportunities due to social affluence and economic access are able to continue their learning (Lareau, 2011). In a study conducted by Entwisle et al. (2001), this phenomenon was revealed when nearly 800 elementary students from middle- and upper-social class backgrounds added 47 raw score points on a reading assessment, where students from low-SES backgrounds added only 1 point, over a five-year period during summer vacations. This evidence supports the notion that even though children from all socioeconomic backgrounds reap benefits in regular school months, during summer vacations when academic access is limited, children from socioeconomically disadvantaged families are not able to maintain their academic development, therefore *sliding* or *losing* skills in their academic development.

McCombs (2011) noted that although summer programs are varied in structure (voluntary, mandatory, at-home, and so forth), this type of enrichment is still beneficial in engaging students to increase reading skills. Kim and Quinn (2013) also found, through a meta-analysis of over 40 summer reading interventions for K–8 students, that students who participated in programs that provided teacher-directed lessons, student-initiated book reading activities, and/or targeted classroom instruction had significantly greater improvement than their peer counterparts who otherwise did not participate.

Another common theme presented in the research on summer programming is that of parental support. A pilot study on an elementary reading summer program conducted by Petty et al. (2019) found that 53% of fourth graders maintained or increased their reading levels, as a result of also providing students at-home reading materials and encouraging activities where parents also engage with instruction. This

finding is consistent with FS evaluative research conducted by PRA (2008) that recognized the positive influence that parental involvement had on student's learning, motivation, and attitudes towards schooling.

Even though research and practice has proven the significant impact summer enrichment programming can have on students' academic outcomes, the challenge lies in providing these high-quality opportunities as a result of budgetary restrictions to federal/state allocated funds, logistical requirements for developing and maintaining summer operations, and limited research on the cost effectiveness of summer learning programs (Alexander & Condliffe, 2016; McCombs, 2011). Though this shortage in quality summer programming has negative educational repercussions for *all* students, the educational gap is intensified for socioeconomically disadvantaged students because of lack of access. Programs like FS address this critical need by providing an opportunity to maintain or improve academic outcomes during the summer months at no cost to participants or their families. In this way, this study sought to interrogate if the FS model can increase fluency ratings amongst middle school students, particularly those students who are categorized as culturally and linguistically diverse.

Method

Research Design

The data collected for this study were part of a larger, mixed methods program evaluation on a Freedom School. However, this manuscript will only include the quantitative components of the study, specifically, student literacy assessment data collected over three consecutive summers at the start and end of the six-week program.

Additional quantitative data included observations of student behaviors and student surveys regarding academic motivation and civic engagement. An Institutional Review Board application was completed and approved prior to the inception of the program. Written consent to participate in the study was given by students' parent/legal guardian, and assent was verbally given by each participant.

Context of the Study

The FS program lasted 30 days in June and July of each year. Though FS is considered a full-day program, students received 2.75 hours of literacy instruction daily: 30 minutes during *Harambee*, where a guest reader was invited to read-aloud; two hours during the curriculum component (also known as the Integrated Reading Curriculum as created solely by the Children's Defense Fund); and finally, 15 minutes of silent, choral, or community reading of a book of the student's choosing from the classroom library. The remaining portions of the day were spent on afternoon activities where programming and instruction varied by site, student identifiers (such as age, gender, and/or grade level), and interests.

The FS program was held at different middle schools each year, which impacted the recruitment, selection, and retention of students from year to year. In the first year, Allen Middle School (pseudonym) was the program site whereas in the second and third year, Paul Middle School (pseudonym) was used for program operation. Students from Allen Middle School, however, were given the option to attend the program, although in the following school year, they returned to their school. As a result of the location variance and because of the low sample size of students who had participated for more than one year, a disaggregate of program

repeaters (and their academic outcomes over multiple years) was not conducted as portion of analysis for the study.

Prior to each year's start of the program, recruitment flyers were distributed to families across the elementary feeder schools and the middle school site in which the program was held. Monthly on-campus orientation meetings were coordinated in the spring prior to the program's start in order to garner student participation. All students were enrolled in the largest school district in Central Texas. Milner (2012) would classify the locale as *urban characteristic*, where the city itself is not densely populated but has experienced significant challenges that are often associated with urban contexts. The district had a majority of students (87.3%) considered economically disadvantaged and nearly 20% had limited English proficiency; the demonstrative growth in the city had also influenced the social and cultural student demographics of the district, whereas 64% of the population was Hispanic/Latino and 28.5% was African American.

It should also be noted that this particular Freedom School program was characterized as a university-based model. Typically, Freedom Schools are run in partnership with local non-profit organizations, churches, or school districts. However, unique to this study, the program was hosted by a private university in Central Texas. Programmatic aspects, such as the structure of the day, instructional focus, and CDF Freedom School objectives and goals, were not different, but the overall focus of the program, staffing, and resources were variable factors to consider. In this university-based model, a faculty member from the School of Education directed the program, graduate (masters and doctoral level) education students held teacher leadership positions, and undergraduate education majors served as teachers (known

as servant leader interns within the Freedom School model). The overall focus of the program was to provide preservice teachers with increased field experiences of working with culturally and linguistically diverse students. In this model, graduate students were also able to develop research skills by participating in data collection and program evaluation methods. The training sessions were similar to other models of the Freedom School program; however, additional workshops and seminars were planned to center on culturally responsive teaching. In some cases, undergraduate students were concurrently enrolled in teacher education courses to connect theory to practice as part of their experience.

Participants

Students from a local middle school (grades 6–7) and elementary feeder schools (grade 5) were invited to participate in the FS program. Regarding criteria, students were considered eligible if currently enrolled in the middle school, or intended to enroll for the upcoming academic year; only students from the sponsoring school district were allowed to participate. For example, a current sixth grade student (from the middle school in which the site was to be held) would be eligible to enroll; also, a fifth grade student (from an elementary school within the district) that would attend the school in the upcoming year, would be considered. However, a student currently in eighth grade would be ineligible to participate as a result of their future enrollment into high school. For each year of the program, all students participated in the National School Lunch Program and therefore would be identified as economically disadvantaged by the school district. Table 1 provides the ethnic/racial identification of each student per year.

Table 1*FS Participants' Ethnic/Racial Identification per Year*

	African American	Hispanic/ Latino	Caucasian/ White
	Year one	16	32
Year two	19	44	7
Year three	12	25	2

In this study, student participation was based on program enrollment and continuation. Of the initially enrolled students in the first year ($n = 50$), 44 completed the program and were present for the administration for both the pre- and post-assessments. In the second year of the program, among those who initially enrolled ($n = 70$), 52 completed the program and were administered assessments. And in the third year, of those who initially enrolled ($n = 40$), 32 completed the program. The disaggregation of participations, based on year and grade, is provided in Table 2. To clarify, only students who completed the entirety of the program (present for both pre- and post-assessments) were included in the study. In addition, some students returned to a second year, and these students were again pre- and post-assessed within their specified grade levels.

Table 2*FS Participants who Completed the Program by Grade Level*

	Year One ($n = 44$)	Year Two ($n = 52$)	Year Three ($n = 32$)
5th grade	19	14	7
6th grade	20	26	14
7th grade	3	12	11

Instrumentation

The Basic Reading Inventory, an individually administered and informal reading measure, was used to document student growth and monitor students' progress in independent and instructional (with guidance) reading levels (Johns, 2005;

Toyama et al., 2017). The BRI was used to document change in student scores before and after program completion. While recent research has indicated that the BRI is poorly aligned with Common Core State Standards and has lower mean scores for complexity compared to other reading inventories (Toyama et al., 2017), this instrument was preferred because it had been widely used—particularly as a FS evaluation measure at the national level—and recommended for use in literacy-based classrooms with diverse student groups (Nilsson, 2008) such as those in the FS program.

Previous studies found mixed results as to the validity and reliability evidence of the BRI. Early on, Helgren-Lempesis and Mangrum (1986) compared the reliability evidence (Pearson and generalizability coefficients) for the BRI and two other informal reading inventories. Their conclusions indicated that the BRI was not a perfect measure, but had higher forms of reliability estimates than what was claimed by critics. Similarly, Bieber et al. (2015) also calculated reliability estimates for multiple reading inventories; they found that test-retest and alternate forms of the BRI were appropriate for low-stakes situations. In terms of validity evidence, the researchers also found that the BRI correlated highly with DIBELS, a popular measure of fluency, and thus the BRI measures a similar construct of reading fluency. Besides the strengths of the BRI regarding its use with this population, this low-stakes situation, and its popularity (especially with other FSs), the BRI is easy to administer, possible to use with all age ranges included in this study, making it the appropriate choice for this study.

In reviewing assessment data, the full range of measures included in the BRI were not utilized. To elaborate, the assessment included three main portions: (1) graded word lists, (2) reading passage, and (3)

comprehension and retelling. Due to the nature of the FS program, as a part of standard evaluation practices within the program, modifications were made to shorten the length of administering pre- and post-assessments. No modifications were made to the graded word lists, where students read a list of 20 words, to determine their level, and continue until difficulty. This word list begins at the pre-primer level and ends at grade 12. On average, participants can read four to six lists before the assessor can determine their levels of independence, instruction, or frustration (as determined by the number of words missed per list). For the reading passage portion, students are asked to read a short story (based on grade levels pre-primer to 12, and passage word count varies by level) and the teacher makes note of the miscues (substitution, insertion, omission, or reversal). However, in this portion, the assessment also identifies the student's oral reading rate and the norm group percentile, through counting the words per minute (WPM). This portion of the assessment was not completed by evaluators since it would have been added pressure to record time for students already identified as struggling or reluctant readers. Instead, the researchers decided it was more important for students to feel comfortable while reading and allowed the assessor to focus on miscue analysis rather than also using a stopwatch. Finally, in the comprehension and retelling portion where students answer 10 pre-scripted, open-ended questions about the reading, there is a retelling notes section where the evaluator is to document/scribe student response when summarizing the story and provide a retelling score (excellent, satisfactory, unsatisfactory). The latter portion of retelling was not completed within the evaluation model in consideration of the possible number of short stories one student may have to encounter to get their

comprehension scoring, their ability to recall information and/or facts may be limited.

Regarding the scoring for assessing students in fluency based on sight word analysis (SW), in-text word recognition (WR), and comprehension questioning (CQ), three categories were formalized, according to the BRI: independent (IND), instructional (INST), and frustration (FRUS). In the SW portion of the assessment, students are asked to read graded word lists that span from the pre-primer level to 12th grade. Miscues for this portion of the assessment are determined by the following levels: 1) less than three determines independence, 2) three to four miscues measures instructional, 3) five to six errors indicate borderline instructional of frustration level, and 4) more than seven miscues determine frustration. In the WR portion where students read the graded word passages, levels vary based on the types of miscues or corrections during the reading passage. Significant miscues include substituting the word, inserting new ones, omissions, or reversing the sentence pattern within the passage. Finally, in the CQ section where students are asked to recall significant portions of the story, miscues and rating are determined by the level of difficulty and based on the student's response. Within this portion of the assessment, each question is also coded to help the assessor determine question type in order to provide skill correction or reteaching.

Each student was administered the BRI on the first day and last day of the program. A trained FS site testing manager (STM) administered the assessments according to the guidelines described in the manual. When students were not present during the initial administration, the STM made daily attempts to assess the child during the first week of the program. It is also important to note that the sample counts for each section

of the assessment and category may vary based on sections of the assessment and participant's abilities. For example, a student in grade six may have demonstrated independence in sight word recognition at the fourth through eighth grade, but upon reading the ninth-grade list, scored frustration. As a result, this student may not have an INST score for sight word recognition. Similarly, a student could do fairly well with sight word and in-text reading portions of the assessment, but lack comprehension abilities and score frustration on the last portion. In this case, the student may not have in IND/INST scoring for the comprehension portion of the assessment. For participants in samples in this study, Cronbach's Alpha reliability scores for the IND and INST assessments were above .87, indicating excellent internal consistency.

Analysis

All data were entered and analyzed by the primary researcher and members of the research team (two education doctoral students) of the FS program. To compare the difference between FS participants' pre- and post- scores, a Wilcoxon signed rank test was conducted using SPSS software (version 26). This nonparametric test, used when assumptions of the linear model cannot be met (Field, 2017), was most appropriate due to the dependent nature of the data and small sample sizes available from each year of the program. Alpha was set at .05 prior to conducting any analyses. Each program year was analyzed separately. Effect sizes (r) were calculated by dividing the standardized test statistic by the square root of the total number of observations.

Results

The Year One results will be discussed first, followed by the Year Two and Year

Three results. Each section includes growth for instructional and independent subsections by each of the subsections of the BRI based on three primary fluency indicators: SW, WR, and CQ.

Year One

Findings revealed that students increased both instructional and independent reading levels in the areas of SW, WR, and CQ. All of the gains proved to be statistically significant for SW and CQ gains from pre- to post-assessments. Table 3 includes students' IND growth and Table 4 provides INST gains.

Table 3

Year One Pre and Post Scores for Fluency Assessment (IND)

	Mean (SD)		W	N
	Pre	Post		
Sight Word	4.57 (1.79)	5.63 (1.87)	131.50***	22
In-Text Word Recognition	5.09 (2.11)	5.22 (2.47)	129.00	22
Comprehension Questioning	3.87 (2.11)	4.71 (2.14)	189.50*	23

Note. * = $p < .05$, *** = $p < .001$.

Table 4

Year One Pre and Post Scores for Fluency Assessment (INST)

	Mean (SD)		W	N
	Pre	Post		
Sight Word	5.57 (1.85)	7.28 (2.19)	171.00***	22
In-Text Word Recognition	5.52 (2.38)	5.97 (2.68)	148.00	23
Comprehension Questioning	4.74 (2.10)	5.70 (2.31)	135.00*	23

Note. * = $p < .05$, *** = $p < .001$.

Mean IND scores from pre-to post-assessment indicate students had growth in all three areas. SW scores improved by more than an entire grade level equivalent in IND from pre-test ($M = 4.57$) to post-test ($M = 5.63$), $W = 131.50$, $p < .001$, $r = 0.50$ as well as in INST pre-test ($M = 5.57$) to post-test ($M = 7.28$), $W = 171.00$, $p < .001$, $r = 0.56$. CQ score changes were statistically significant and had almost a full grade level

of growth for both IND and INST scores. For IND, CQ pre-test scores ($M = 3.87$) were smaller compared to post-test scores ($M = 4.71$), $W = 189.50$, $p < .05$, $r = .30$. This was true for INST as well, with CQ pre-test scores ($M = 4.74$) being lower than post-test scores ($M = 5.70$), $W = 135.00$, $p < .05$, $r = 0.32$. While not statistically significant, WR scores did increase on average. WR IND scores increased from 5.09 to 5.22 and INST increased from 5.52 to 5.97 and had effect sizes of 0.14 and 0.24, respectively. In regards to the population demographic for this year and independence ratings, where majority of students were in fifth and sixth grade (93%), scores range in mid-fourth to near-sixth grade range; except for the CQ category which is initially significantly lower than other reported ranges. INST scores, however, seemed to be more in range with participants’ grade-levels in terms of achievement.

Year Two

Findings from Year Two also revealed that students increased both reading levels in all three areas. All of the gains proved to be statistically significant with students’ growth in their independent reading levels being the largest. Table 5 includes the results from the IND assessments and Table 6 shows the INST scores.

Table 5
Year Two Pre and Post Scores for Fluency Assessment (IND)

	Mean (SD)		<i>W</i>	N
	Pre	Post		
Sight Word	5.43 (2.05)	6.92 (2.60)	448.00***	36
In-Text Word Recognition	6.02 (1.75)	6.97 (1.68)	303.50***	29
Comprehension Questioning	5.36 (1.64)	7.18 (1.96)	153.00***	20

Note. * = $p < .05$, *** = $p < .001$.

Table 6
Year Two Pre and Post Scores for Fluency Assessment (INST)

	Mean (SD)		<i>W</i>	N
	Pre	Post		
Sight Word	6.55 (1.82)	7.45 (2.19)	319.00*	37
In-Text Word Recognition	6.07 (1.78)	6.68 (1.70)	276.00***	29
Comprehension Questioning	5.55 (1.50)	6.94 (2.02)	383.00***	31

Note. * = $p < .05$, *** = $p < .001$.

The average gains all indicated at least a grade level amount of growth in all three IND and INST areas over the course of the program. SW scores improved by more than an entire grade level equivalent in IND from pre-test ($M = 5.43$) to post-test ($M = 6.92$), $W = 448.00$, $p < .001$, $r = 0.47$ and almost an entire grade level from INST pre-test ($M = 6.55$) to post-test ($M = 7.45$), $W = 319.00$, $p < .05$, $r = 0.43$. CQ scores had the largest increase, with an average gain of almost two grade levels for IND and a year and a half of growth for INST. For IND, CQ pre-test scores ($M = 5.36$) were smaller compared to post-test scores ($M = 7.18$), $W = 153.00$, $p < .001$, $r = .52$. This was similar for INST, with CQ pre-test scores ($M = 5.55$) being lower than post-test scores ($M = 6.94$), $W = 383.00$, $p < .001$, $r = 0.58$. WR had the least amount of growth, but the average gains were approximately one grade level and half of a grade level for IND and INST respectively and were also statistically significant. WR IND pre-test scores ($M = 6.02$) were lower than post-test scores ($M = 6.97$), $W = 303.50$, $p < .001$, $r = .56$ as were the INST scores from pre-test ($M = 6.07$) to post-test ($M = 6.68$), $W = 276.00$, $p < .001$, $r = .50$. In this year, majority of students were in sixth grade (50%) which also seemed to be in alignment with both IND and INST measures at the pre- and post-assessment levels.

Year Three

Consistent with Year One and Year Two results, students' scores for Year Three increased from pre- to post- in all three IND and INST areas. Table 7 includes the results from the IND and Table 8 shows the INST results.

Table 7

Year Three Pre and Post Scores for Fluency Assessment (IND)

	Mean (SD)		<i>W</i>	N
	Pre	Post		
Sight Word	6.29 (2.06)	7.56 (2.28)	179.00*	25
In-Text Word Recognition	7.22 (2.29)	7.98 (1.88)	177.50	26
Comprehension Questioning	5.24 (1.71)	6.79 (1.48)	287.50***	26

Note. * = $p < .05$, *** = $p < .001$.

Table 8

Year Three Pre and Post Scores for Fluency Assessment (INST)

	Mean (SD)		<i>W</i>	N
	Pre	Post		
Sight Word	8.65 (2.29)	9.77 (2.08)	186.00***	24
In-Text Word Recognition	7.89 (2.08)	8.39 (1.65)	97.50	18
Comprehension Questioning	6.73 (2.04)	7.45 (1.41)	118.00	21

Note. * = $p < .05$, *** = $p < .001$.

SW scores had the largest increase, with statistically significant gains for both IND and INST areas. Mean differences indicated over a grade level of SW IND growth from pre-test ($M = 6.29$) to post-test ($M = 7.56$), $W = 179.00$, $p < .05$, $r = 0.48$ and over an entire grade level from INST pre-test ($M = 8.65$) to post-test ($M = 9.77$), $W = 186.00$, $p < .001$, $r = 0.53$. CQ scores also had a statistically significant increase in IND scores with a year and a half of growth for IND scores. For IND, CQ pre-test scores ($M = 5.24$) were smaller compared to post-test scores ($M = 6.79$), $W = 287.50$, $p < .001$, $r = .55$. This was similar but not as large of change for INST scores, with CQ pre-test

scores ($M = 6.73$) being lower than post-test scores ($M = 7.45$), $W = 118.00$, $p > .05$, $r = 0.22$. WR had the least amount of growth although students' scores increased at least half of a grade level on average. While not statistically significant, WR IND pre-test scores ($M = 7.22$) were lower than post-test scores ($M = 7.98$), $W = 177.50$, $p > .05$, $r = .23$ as were the INST scores from pre-test ($M = 7.89$) to post-test ($M = 8.39$), $W = 97.50$, $p > .05$, $r = .17$. In regards to the population demographic for this year and independence ratings, where majority of students were in sixth and seventh grade (63%), CQ levels seemed to be an outlier in the IND reading measures, but at the INST level, participants seemed to exceedingly well across all three indicators.

It should be noted that overall, FS program participants experienced the greatest independent reading gains when measuring comprehension questioning, whereas at the instructional level, sight word analysis had improved the most significantly.

Discussion

This study sought to examine how students' scores in both independent (IND) and instructional (INST) reading levels changed as a result of participation in a FS. Using data from three years in the program suggests that the program supports students' growth in sight word analysis, in-text word recognition, and comprehension questioning at the independent and instructional reading levels. On average, the students gained skills equivalent to at least half of a grade level, although some gained almost two years of reading growth.

Based on the research questions posed, FS program participants increased their independent and instructional fluency reading levels, as measured by the BRI. In addition, in all categories of the assessment,

students' scores demonstrated improvement; however, sight-word analysis and comprehension questioning proved to be the most significant. This finding supports the work of Bui and Fagan (2013) who noted how the use of multicultural books positively impact reading gains, most notably word recognition and reading comprehension. It seems that the books used, which at the middle school level are chapter books/novels, help students to readily identify words that are presented in isolation (graded word lists) or in reading passages, and students are able to answer questions about them and their connection to the stories read. In consideration of the graded word lists used to determine sight-word fluency, the findings revealed that students had less difficulty in identifying words. This finding could be explained as the possible result of being exposed to a multitude of books throughout the duration of the program. FS participants, on average, are exposed to three texts daily—the read aloud text, the chapter book/novel used as part of the reading curriculum for the week, and a self-selected book to read independently. It is highly likely students were conditioned to use literacy skills as a result of participating in a program where they are constantly inundated with texts to increase their academic rigor in reading. In this way, the opportunity for continuous reading enrichment during the summer months prove to be paramount in keeping students engaged and school-ready (Kim & Quinn, 2013; Petty et al., 2019).

This study is significant for a variety of reasons. First, although the program was only 30 days in length, the nearly three hours of daily reading intervention seemed to be an effective means of increasing fluency amongst participants. In addition, previous studies have only examined the growth of students' instructional levels; however, the assertion that the program

increases independent reading levels can also be made. In particular, the data reflect that CQ had the greatest gains overall for independent reading, and sight word analysis at the instructional level. Bui and Fagan (2013) shared that by using multicultural texts, students develop and deepen their vocabulary knowledge, comprehension, and ability to recall information about the texts. This study affirms their work. In addition, the findings supported existent literature that discusses how multicultural texts foster and build concepts of self-identity (Osorio, 2018), connection building and community (Hefflin, 2012), and social justice advocacy and action (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). While further research could examine how the utilization of multicultural literature impacts the fluency indicators, the assertion could be made that students were able to increase their sight-word analysis and comprehension skills as a result of the consistent exposure to culturally relevant texts.

Second, the results support findings from existing literature regarding the major impact of the program on middle school students' reading achievement. Based on existent literature, this study confirms what researchers have claimed regarding the impact of the FS program on reading achievement. PRA (2008) demonstrated a two-month increase in reading abilities among middle school students, whereas Portwood et al. (2009) found that 86% of FS program participants had increased or maintained reading achievement. Taylor et al. (2010) noted that nearly 90% of students increased or maintained their reading abilities, whereas middle school students had demonstrated over a year of growth. This study, too, solidifies the notion that FS programming reduces summer learning loss amongst participants, most notably in the middle school grade levels. Previous studies

were not intentional in providing literacy enrichment to only middle grade students; some sites hosted various levels/ages of students which added to the overall diversity of the site, but this factor could have directly impacted the overall academic outputs of the students. It should be noted that within the FS model, sites can opt to select the grade/age demographic of their participants. Unique to this study and the research site, researchers were specific in recruitment of only middle school participants in order to control for instructional variation, which allowed for more commonalities amongst FS teacher leaders, and students. These commonalities were beneficial because FS teacher leaders were able to coordinate and collaborate on instructional approaches and have conversations about best practices for middle school participants.

In addition, since all students were at or approaching middle school level, all students concurrently read the same books as prescribed by the curriculum. It is possible that students engaged in additional dialogue about the curriculum when outside of classrooms, which could increase motivation, interest, and further academic fluency and comprehension. It should also be noted that the academic growth rates of student participants were considerably higher than peers' improvement ratings, as reported in previous studies. This too, could be a variable in examining their academic performance.

Finally, this site utilized a university-based model, which from a methodological perspective, is less explored in FS. Since the start of the CDF FS program in 1995, most sites have been sponsored by a church or religious entity, non-profit or community organization, or in partnership with a public school district, with few at the postsecondary level. In fact, during the first year of program implementation, it was reported that only 8% of the FS sites were

housed in partnership with a college/university. Within the 8%, even fewer were centralized in the School or College of Education unit where there is a direct focus on the application of pedagogical practices and teacher preparedness models.

As such, it was the goal of this site to be specific in providing pre-service teachers and education graduates with increased experiences with diverse student populations. It could be argued that the discrete focus of FS teacher leaders being pre-service educators and/or education graduates had an impact on the program and therefore contributed to the academic achievement of its program participants.

Study Limitations

Some limitations are to be considered when examining the results of this study. First, there was an average loss of 20% of students from pre- to post- assessments within each year of the program, indicating a possible selection or survival bias in the sample. Without external data sources, such as school assessments or socioeconomic variables, it remains impossible to know how the students who did not return differed from those who did return. Additionally, some of the grades had small sample sizes which prevented grade-level analyses that could have provided more insight as to how different age groups responded to the FS model. This also required the use of nonparametric tests, which have been known to decrease power to detect effects (Field, 2017). Finally, there was not a preponderance of returner data in order to run individual analysis in order to measure growth over the course of multiple years of participation in the program.

Suggestions for Future Research

The impact of FS has been studied, but not at great length. As such, there are other recommendations for future studies. First, in analyzing the impact of academic growth (IND and INST) amongst students, a follow-up study could perform a third iteration of the BRI to determine if there is progression from the summer months into the concurrent school year. Opportunity also exists to match the standardized measures used in traditional schools—for example, the STAAR assessment in Texas, or other literacy assessments in FS programs—to learn if comparable growth occurs from the end of the academic year to the end of summer program. Additionally, analyzing growth from comparison groups (i.e., students in other summer enrichment programs) could help demonstrate the distinct effects of FS programs.

Another study could also more deeply examine the correlation between culturally relevant texts, the FS program, and literacy outcomes for middle school students. In consideration that empirical findings consistently report that middle school students' experience the greatest gains in reading when participating in Freedom School, and in comparison to their counterparts who would otherwise not have literacy enrichment, a future study could review the pedagogical strategies used in FS settings that center on multicultural literature. To elaborate, novels are used in the FS curriculum at the middle school level, but the extent to which students can overcome text difficulty should be examined.

A comparison also is needed of other summer programs to the Freedom School model, in terms of examining reading gains for students. While the nature of summer programming seems to be on the rise in recognition that students need additional

exposure and enrichment activities outside of school, finding camps that provide most of the same components as Freedom Schools (daily duration and length of program, instructional time, multicultural book selection) may be difficult. Still, this avenue should be explored to examine the possible strengths of the program, and in advocacy for increased sites across the nation.

Finally, the utilization of the university-based model could be studied within the framework of the traditional FS models. It would be interesting to examine if pedagogical themes are present and persistent in all types of FS. Unlocking this theme would be beneficial for public school educators, hence bridging the FS model to traditional school and possibly increasing reading achievement for students.

Conclusion

This study sought to explore the impact of the Freedom School program on middle school students' reading achievement. In reviewing the existing literature on the academic outputs of Freedom Schools, the researchers recognized that the model could reduce summer learning loss amongst students (particularly those in middle school) by utilizing multicultural literature. Findings support the program's effectiveness in increasing students' reading outcomes, as demonstrated in the existent literature, but at both independent and instructional levels; however, the study departs from others in that the selection of participants and sampling were intentional in order to yield deeper implications for reducing summer learning loss. In addition, the FS site was affiliated with a university which could have also had a greater impact on the academic outcomes of the program, where data collection and sampling was more scrutinized. It is hoped that this study extends the discussion of the CDF Freedom

School model and its impact on reducing summer learning loss for students from low-income backgrounds.

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Appendix A

Table 1

FS Participants’ Ethnic/Racial Identification per Year

	African American	Hispanic/ Latino	Caucasian/ White
Year one	16	32	2
Year two	19	44	7
Year three	12	25	2

Appendix B**Table 2***FS Participants who Completed the Program by Grade Level*

	Year One (<i>n</i> = 44)	Year Two (<i>n</i> = 52)	Year Three (<i>n</i> = 32)
5th grade	19	14	7
6th grade	20	26	14
7th grade	3	12	11

Appendix C

Table 3

Year One Pre and Post Scores for Fluency Assessment (IND)

	Mean (SD)		W	N
	Pre	Post		
Sight Word	4.57 (1.79)	5.63 (1.87)	131.50***	22
In-Text Word Recognition	5.09 (2.11)	5.22 (2.47)	129.00	22
Comprehension Questioning	3.87 (2.11)	4.71 (2.14)	189.50*	23

Note. * = $p < .05$, *** = $p < .001$.

Appendix D

Table 4

Year One Pre and Post Scores for Fluency Assessment (INST)

	Mean (SD)		W	N
	Pre	Post		
Sight Word	5.57 (1.85)	7.28 (2.19)	171.00***	22
In-Text Word Recognition	5.52 (2.38)	5.97 (2.68)	148.00	23
Comprehension Questioning	4.74 (2.10)	5.70 (2.31)	135.00*	23

Note. * = $p < .05$, *** = $p < .001$.

Appendix E

Table 5

Year Two Pre and Post Scores for Fluency Assessment (IND)

	Mean (SD)		<i>W</i>	N
	Pre	Post		
Sight Word	5.43 (2.05)	6.92 (2.60)	448.00***	36
In-Text Word Recognition	6.02 (1.75)	6.97 (1.68)	303.50***	29
Comprehension Questioning	5.36 (1.64)	7.18 (1.96)	153.00***	20

Note. * = $p < .05$, *** = $p < .001$.

Appendix F

Table 6

Year Two Pre and Post Scores for Fluency Assessment (INST)

	Mean (SD)		<i>W</i>	N
	Pre	Post		
Sight Word	6.55 (1.82)	7.45 (2.19)	319.00*	37
In-Text Word Recognition	6.07 (1.78)	6.68 (1.70)	276.00***	29
Comprehension Questioning	5.55 (1.50)	6.94 (2.02)	383.00***	31

Note. * = $p < .05$, *** = $p < .001$.

Appendix G

Table 7

Year Three Pre and Post Scores for Fluency Assessment (IND)

	Mean (SD)		<i>W</i>	N
	Pre	Post		
Sight Word	6.29 (2.06)	7.56 (2.28)	179.00*	25
In-Text Word Recognition	7.22 (2.29)	7.98 (1.88)	177.50	26
Comprehension Questioning	5.24 (1.71)	6.79 (1.48)	287.50***	26

Note. * = $p < .05$, *** = $p < .001$.

Appendix H

Table 8

Year Three Pre and Post Scores for Fluency Assessment (INST)

	Mean (SD)		<i>W</i>	N
	Pre	Post		
Sight Word	8.65 (2.29)	9.77 (2.08)	186.00***	24
In-Text Word Recognition	7.89 (2.08)	8.39 (1.65)	97.50	18
Comprehension Questioning	6.73 (2.04)	7.45 (1.41)	118.00	21

Note. * = $p < .05$, *** = $p < .001$.