

Episode 15: Effects of COVID-19 on Summer Learning Loss

Becky Lewis: Hello listeners! I am so blessed to be welcoming back Brandie Turner. Brandie, I want to start off by thanking you for coming back on to the show and co-hosting again.

Brandie Turner: Thanks, Becky. I am excited to be here.

Becky Lewis : Today we are discussing an issue that every educator experiences at the start of the school year, summer learning loss.

Brandie Turner: Yes, not only does it impact teachers, principals, and school districts but it impacts our state as a whole. Our work on the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading is focused on reducing the achievement gap and a large part of our work is dedicated to supporting county school districts and community organizations as they develop plans for providing students with engaging, educational experiences during the summer months to help reduce the summer learning loss.

Becky Lewis: I want to define summer learning loss for our listeners. Summer learning loss – or what others refer to as the summer slide – is an educational phenomenon where students lose some of the knowledge, skills and ability they acquired over the school year. Research indicates that about one month of learning is lost after summer vacation for some students.

Brandie Turner: Becky, that statistic is alarming for so many reasons. The statistic is demonstrating what the loss would be during typical times. But with the pandemic, there is nothing typical about what we are experiencing. And... obviously those losses differ from one student to the next depending on their home environment, the opportunities they have over the summer, etc. We certainly aren't trying to stereotype families, but research shows that low-income families spend less time reading and talking with their children. They also have limited resources to provide experiences outside of the home. The loss is the greatest for those students who have little exposure to books, experiences, and meaningful conversations during the summer months. Experiences such as summer camps, museum visits, vacations, are not opportunities that all children have. What is interesting is that some more affluent families also have to be intentional about reading and talking with their children due to busy work and extracurricular activities. Many families do not sit down at the dinner table each night and talk. What is amazing is the impact interactions like this have on learning. Typically, 6 weeks are spent re-learning old material in the fall to make up for such a learning loss.

Becky Lewis: Right and the students that are most impacted with that huge loss are those students that come from low-income families, which is most of the students in our state. Cooper, Nye, and colleagues completed a meta-analysis in 1996 that confirms these findings for reading. Specifically, it found that family income made a difference in absolute and relative gains and losses during the summer, and this was especially true for reading; the analysis showed a three-month difference in learning in reading skills between middle-income and lower-income children over the summer. Children from lower-income families lost, on average,

more learning specifically in reading comprehension and word recognition than children from higher-income families (who, in fact, made gains in word recognition). Research also suggests that summer learning loss is cumulative. So, to put in perspective if a child enters kindergarten already behind and then experience summer learning loss every year after with no support or intervention then by the time, they exit elementary school they could be as far as 18 months behind their peers in terms of achievement. Not only are they falling behind but then spending that much time at the beginning of the year certainly hinders the pace of learning new information. Unfortunately, researchers are finding that the impact that the closures will cause due to COVID 19 will be even greater.

Brandie Turner: Yes, the NWEA research has done some preliminary estimates that suggest that students will return in fall 2020 with roughly a 30% learning loss in reading and 50% in math. These numbers are alarming. But what's more alarming is that the impact on those students who would already be impacted by summer learning loss will be even greater. In some instances, students will be nearly a full year behind what we would observe in normal conditions.

Becky Lewis: Another setback that we could see in terms of summer learning loss, is that many educational opportunities and organizations that supports students' educational development during the summer months are closed or are in the process of modifying the programming options and schedules.

Brandie Turner: This is unfortunately the case for many summer service providers. One of the organizations we work with is modifying their programming to be an online platform and mail delivery which we know will not be as beneficial for these students as an in-person hands-on experience. Other organizations still haven't made their final decisions yet, so who knows what options might turn up. The uncertainty is what families are struggling with the most.

Becky Lewis: However, what is hopeful about the situation is experts around the world are working to support schools in how they can address these challenges. Schools should know they are not alone in this and that help is out there. I know our team has been working to support counties in their re-entry plan for the fall. Brandie, what do the experts recommend should be the focus in this scenario?

Brandie Turner: First and foremost, schools should focus on putting a team together in order to develop a plan for the fall. While I realize the situation is every-changing and there is still so much unknown about next school year. It will be important to get ahead of what might happen and plan for each scenario accordingly so in the fall decisions aren't rushed. That plan should include focusing on accelerating student's learning instead of remediating. If schools spend too much time focusing on the standards that may have been missed from the previous grade, our students will never catch up.

Becky Lewis: I've also read how even though many schools are on summer break, that the schools should continue to provide quality resources and support so that students continue

their learning and hopefully lessen that gap. Some districts are providing links to online field trips for students to explore a specific location in order to continue to build their knowledge and vocabulary about the world. I know that Wood County is providing books for their students from kindergarten through 12th grade along with activities and supplies that help students to engage with the book at a deeper level.

Brandie Turner: In the fall, it will be vital that schools determine a way to collect data on where the students are in regard to reading and math and determine where their gaps are in relation to their current grade-level standards. Without this data, teachers will inevitably either revert back to the previous year's standards or move forward with the current year's grade-level content and not address knowledge gaps that might be a prerequisite for future learning.

Becky Lewis: This is a difficult position for teachers to be in, and you're right, without data they won't know where to go. The focus will need to be building knowledge of the current grade-level expectations. The idea will be to provide students with supports and scaffolds in order to master that grade-level standard without going backwards to teach the previous grade-level standards. I know that when I was in the classroom every year there would be some students who had not mastered the 3rd grade standards that came before and in my first year of teaching, when I saw these holes I went backward to fill the holes and quickly realized that if I continued on this path that I would never teach the 4th grade standards that my students needed and the students who had mastered the 3rd grade standards weren't being challenged or accelerated at the level they needed because I was going so slow. I quickly realized how to prioritize my standards and provided scaffolds along with differentiated, small group instruction to help those students with gaps to master the grade-level standards required. That year I also learned how important it was to let my standards drive my instruction. I feel like when school starts back up in the fall that teachers will find a larger majority of their students are behind and may not have mastered as many of the previous grade-level standards and it's critical to remember that mastering the current grade-level standards is the ultimate goal of instruction and that providing students with the means to reach those standards is even more crucial now than ever before.

Brandie Turner: Differentiation will be an important piece of the learning that will need to take place this fall more than ever. We all know that differentiation is best practice in teaching students according to their individual needs, and teachers will need to employ this strategy in order to meet the variations they will find when students return to school. This is not a new practice in education, but one that can be improved upon in our classrooms. Whole group instruction can be utilized for introducing new content, but in order to fill the learning gaps and provide scaffolds, small group instruction focusing on differentiated learning will be necessary.

Becky Lewis: Speaking of whole group instruction, Brandie. I think that melding content areas together this year will also be another critical instructional practice that educators will need to bring to the table. Especially if we are faced with another remote learning situation. When we take for example Science and Social Studies standards and integrate that with our reading and

writing instruction, we are able to accelerate the learning for our students at a much quicker pace than isolating out those content areas. I was one of those teachers who had a hard time letting go of my box of content areas due to grades. However, I eventually seen that when I integrated content areas more and more it actually saved me time and effort when it came to grade because assignments could be collected as grades for multiple content areas. You just have to evaluate it differently for the grading purpose. Another point I want to put out there is that when you do choose a science or social studies topics to focus your reading or writing instruction around you can also find rich fiction pieces that incorporate those same topics into their plot. For example, if you are studying fossils which is a third-grade science standard the Magic Tree House series has a book on dinosaurs that you could read with your students to work on those fiction reading skills around plot, characters, genres, and themes.

Brandie Turner: provide example from classroom experience

****many teachers are already putting much of this into practice, so even though it sounds overwhelming, teachers will just need to be more intentional about differentiation, integrating content area knowledge, etc. And accelerating student learning...**

Becky Lewis: Let's not forget about the social-emotional needs that these students will need support in when they return...this has been a traumatic experience for everyone...students, teachers, parents, etc. This is something that can't be ignored.

Brandie Turner: Educators in every position will want to be responsive to their students' needs. Their emotional needs will be just as important as their academic needs. We know that how children learn is just as important as what they learn. To be successful academically, students need to learn certain social skills like cooperation, assertiveness, responsibility, empathy and self-control. Neuroscience has confirmed that our emotional states are directly related to how well we learn. Even feelings like embarrassment, boredom, or frustration -- not only fear -- can spur the brain to enter the proverbial "fight or flight" mode. The amygdala goes into overdrive and gets in the way of the parts of the brain that can store memories.

Becky Lewis: Right, back a couple of episodes ago we featured Anna Rowe, a national trauma expert and she talked about how we can help children learn to identify these emotions and feelings that they are experiencing with Dan Siegal's hand model of the brain. This is an easy way for not only us as educators to understand our students but for our students to begin the steps toward self-realization and self-regulation of emotions. Now is also the time when that relationship building piece of those social-emotional needs will be even more vital for educators, students, and families. I can speak from hosting our special covid-19 bonus episodes that our teachers are finding how crucial those relationship building pieces have been to help parents and students to be successful during remote learning. And these episodes also featured how excited teachers are about the new innovative ways that they are reaching their families and the new perspectives that educator have of their students and families through the online,

live meetings, phone conversations, and other connections that have been made through this unprecedented circumstance.

Brandie Turner: I love these episodes and encourage listeners to go back and listen if you've missed them. Like Becky mentioned, they don't only focus on how teachers are providing content to students but also how they are meeting social-emotional needs. Many of our children in WV need this support more than anything else.

Becky Lewis: I want to thank you once again for being here today and co-hosting with me this month.

Brandie Turner: Thank you, it was a pleasure.

Becky Lewis: I want to ask you one final question as we finish up this episode on Summer Slide. What is one tip or piece of advice that you can give educators focused on Summer Slide that can help them to continue to develop as leaders of literacy?

Brandie Turner: I think the best way we can support families during this time is by giving them grace. This is a tough situation for all of us and as a parent who is trying to juggle work and childcare, I can see how overwhelming it could be to add another layer of educational expectations on top of that.