

Learning Loss: A Summer Problem

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Abstract

Regions with a lengthy summer break can create negative outcomes for learners; this problem is referred to as summer learning loss, summer learning gap, or summer slide. Summer learning loss is loss of academic knowledge and skill that accumulates over the break from school. When students return to school after the summer break, teachers need to re-teach previously taught material. The academic loss may result in achievement gaps that widen each year for students. Government-implemented interventions and voluntary summer programs have potential to limit summer learning loss, and hence decrease the achievement gap. Summer learning loss is a critical problem that has long-term consequences. However, there are solutions that can limit learning loss for students.

Summer vacation is a time that most teachers and students look forward to, because it brings opportunities such as camping, staying up late, and hanging out with friends. Reading assessments, math quizzes, and science experiments are quickly forgotten when summer break begins. Although summer brings a much-needed break for teachers, students, and support staff, the break from school creates a problem for some learners. This problem is referred to as summer learning loss, summer learning gap, or summer slide (Meyer et al., 2017). Summer learning loss occurs in regions with a lengthy summer break, which results in a loss of academic knowledge and skills. The school year acts as a great equalizer because it creates equal learning opportunities for students (Coley et al., 2020). The summer months do some students a disservice because these equal opportunities are no longer available. Without the same opportunities, these students can fall behind. This requires teachers to re-teach previously covered material. Although loss of learning varies throughout all subject areas, the highest areas of loss occur in math and literacy. Additionally, this loss may result in achievement gaps that widen each year. However, addressing poverty and compensating for unequal opportunities throughout the summer months can limit learning loss. Offering literacy and numeracy programming through at-home instruction and summer programming will also limit learning loss, while shrinking the achievement gap. Summer learning loss is a critical problem, and although there are limitations to the variety of possible interventions, there are attainable solutions to limit this loss.

How Summer Learning Loss Impacts Academic Success

Although summer learning loss typically affects most students, the extent of knowledge loss varies throughout math, science, reading and writing. Typically, greater losses are seen in math than reading, and it is not uncommon for students to lose two months of previously learned math skills every summer (Boulay & McChesney, 2021). Such loss can be attributed to students viewing math as a school-only concept, and therefore being unable to connect math with their everyday lives. This disconnect limits students from practising math skills throughout the summer, which directly affects the knowledge loss that they bring into the next school year. Although opportunities for reading appear to be more abundant during the summer months, there is no focus on accuracy, fluency or comprehension, which contributes to loss (McDaniel et al., 2017). For students from more affluent families, literacy opportunities may present themselves through trips to the museum, for example, where they are reading text to learn about what they are viewing. For students from less advantaged families, these opportunities

can come from texting friends, reading signs from the local mall, or even finding programming on television. Although summer learning loss affects most students, the variety of experiences available to students impacts the type and degree of learning loss.

Students who come from families with low economic status can be disadvantaged by not having the same summer learning opportunities as those from upper income families. Schools work tirelessly to provide equal opportunities for children. However, when a child leaves the school, the inequities among students are evident. This is exacerbated throughout the summer months: disadvantaged families may be unable to make up for the lack of school resources, whereas families with higher incomes have the means to provide a richer learning environment from home (Meyer et al., 2017). Unfortunately, economic status is directly linked to opportunity (Boulay & McChesney, 2021). Summer camp, museums, libraries, and family camping are only a few examples of opportunities typically offered to middle or high-income families. These learning opportunities expand a child's knowledge base and give practice in literacy and numeracy skills, which are not as accessible to their peers from low-income families (Coley et al., 2020). Furthermore, for those students from low-income families who enter the summer already behind their peers, the summer only adds to the achievement gap, with those students starting the next school year even further behind their higher income peers (McDaniel et al., 2017).

Children from low socio-economic status households often start their academic years behind in math, reading, and science, and this learning gap continues to grow as students advance into the next grade (Coley et al., 2020). Summer learning loss has been found to create an achievement gap with an average of three months between students from high and low-income families (Meyer et al., 2017). By the time students begin middle school, this achievement gap can put students from low-income families one or two years behind grade level (McDaniel et al., 2017). As time goes on, the achievement gap widens, which affects formal education after high school, employment opportunities, and ultimately the income that an adult will make (Augustine et al., 2013).

Interventions To Limit Summer Learning Loss

Families with low economic status can struggle to provide the same summer learning opportunities as those from higher economic status. Government interventions and summer programming have potential to limit summer learning loss.

Government-Implemented Interventions

Government and policy makers can compensate for the unequal opportunities offered to lower income families that take place outside of regular school days (Davies & Aurini, 2013, such as by financially supporting lunch programs. Another approach that government and policy makers can take, in order to ensure that all children receive more time of equal opportunities in school, is to change the traditional school year calendar. Removing the two-month summer break and putting in smaller breaks throughout the school year would eliminate the long stretch of time away from school and the unequal opportunities that accompany such a break (Leefatt, 2015).

Voluntary Summer Programs

Voluntary summer programs are another targeted strategy that can work toward reducing summer learning loss. Although many children would benefit from attending a voluntary summer program, those from low-income families need to be targeted because high-income families tend to enrol their children in quality programming with greater frequency (Alexander et al., 2007). Notifying families early in the year, little or no enrolment cost, accessible transportation,

and meal programs reduce barriers that families from low-income face when enrolling their children in summer learning programs (McCombs et al., 2012).

Community School Investigators (CSI) is a program of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Winnipeg, which provides summer learning opportunities to students from low-income families in the Pembina Trails and Winnipeg One School Divisions (Manitoba Government, 2013). Academic Summer Program Including Recreation and Education (ASPIRE) is a similarly run program based in the Louis Riel School Division, which offers free programming for students in grades 1-6 (Louis Riel School Division, 2021). Although poverty directly impacts opportunity, it is possible to offer students from low-income families summer learning opportunities that can limit the amount of learning loss.

Schools can play an active role in limiting summer learning loss in literacy by providing families with rich literacy activities to engage in over the summer break. Summer learning loss occurs throughout all subject areas, with the highest losses occurring in math and literacy. Increasing the availability to reading material encourages children to read over the summer, which reduces learning loss (Leefatt, 2015). Children who receive books, postcards, and letters from their teachers before the summer begins spend more time engaging in literacy activities over the summer months, compared to their peers who do not receive the same type of intervention (Kim, 2007).

Providing reading material for children to practise accuracy and fluency is an imperative strategy to combating loss acquired in reading. However, equally as important is providing activities to support comprehension for reading materials (McDaniel et al., 2017). ASPIRE instructors are Faculty of Education students in Winnipeg, who lead children through various activities to engage and build skills in literacy, math, and problem solving (Louis Riel School Division, 2021). CSI also provides literacy, numeracy, and science activities; children report leaving the summer program with a substantial increase of literacy and numeracy skills (Boys & Girls Clubs of Winnipeg, 2012). Access to reading material, literacy activities, and summer programs that engage children in rich learning opportunities are strategies for limiting summer learning loss.

In order to address the achievement gap from summer learning loss, education must be viewed as a year-round commitment (Leefatt, 2015). Pre-school, whole-day kindergarten, after-school, weekend, and summer programs are strategies to combat summer learning loss (Davies & Aurini, 2013). Participating in summer learning programs limits learning loss and can even produce gains for children (McCombs et al., 2012). Results from summer learning program studies confirm that the effects of the summer learning can stay with children for up to two years (McCombs et al., 2012). Prioritizing learning as a year-round commitment, and implementing programs that support summer learning, limit summer learning loss, which in turn reduces the achievement gap.

Limitations to Summer Learning Interventions

Although research supports the interventions to limit summer learning loss, there are limitations associated with the interventions. Providing lunch programs to students from low economic status households for example, is a costly endeavor on a school-based level. Many schools apply for grants to receive funding for their programs, but not all schools apply for or receive such grants, which further reinforces unequal opportunities for students. Providing students with literacy interventions facilitated by teachers over the summer has limitations because teachers and support staff are not paid employees over the summer holidays. Therefore, staff are either volunteering their time over the summer break or administrators need to provide time for teachers and support staff to prepare before the summer begins; these options may not be sustainable long term and many schools may choose not to participate. Lastly, voluntary summer programs have limitations associated with them. For example, in 2012 the CSI program was supported by individual donors and 18 group donors (Boys & Girls Clubs

of Winnipeg, 2012). Without the donors' financial support, the program would not be able to run. Furthermore, not all children are able to attend such programming, reinforcing the inequities for students who need extra support.

Conclusion

The end to a school year brings the excitement of summer vacation because students and teachers look forward to putting the previous year behind them. Although this break provides an opportunity to rest and re-charge, it brings what we know as summer learning loss. Summer learning loss is connected to reduced exposure to learning opportunities at home, socio-economic status, and poverty. The school year provides a balance of instruction and opportunity in an attempt to give all students what they need to succeed academically, but not all students are afforded the same types of opportunities during the summer months. Learning loss differs across the different subject areas of math, science, reading, and writing, creating a learning gap that widens each year. However, providing opportunities to those affected by unequal opportunity can limit learning loss. Although there are limitations to summer learning interventions, providing rich literacy and numeracy instruction and activities limits learning loss while decreasing the achievement gap. Summer learning loss is a critical problem, but solutions can be implemented to meet the needs of students.

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About the Author

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