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EDUCATION

Will early literacy see setback in pandemic?

Word-rich settings have been harder to create with distance learning

By Karen D'Souza

EdSource

The pandemic has touched many students with heightened stress, disruptions and remote learning hurdles, but experts say it may have the greatest impact on the youngest learners, those in the formative years of learning to read.

Creating a language-rich environment on Zoom has been hard for teachers, and that may impact reluctant readers, who may not spend enough time reading at home.

"If you had a childhood where a bedtime story was not a normal part of life, you might not see the value of it," said Seena Hawley, who runs the Berkeley Baby Book Project, an affiliate of Dolly Parton's Imagination

Library, which gives children a book a month from babyhood to age 5. "There are also some parents who aren't great readers themselves, so they may be intimidated by reading to children."

Hawley will never forget encountering one such reluctant reader, a boisterous 8-year-old

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named Reggie who actively disliked reading.

"I think it had always been painful for him. He was on his guard," said Hawley, 61, who taught elementary school in San Jose for 12 years. "He had never known the sheer pleasure of being read to, so he was very skeptical. He expected it to be no fun, all work and no reward."

Assessing the impact of the pandemic on children who may not have sharpened their reading skills as well as expected is crucial, many experts say, as students return to school. That's because early literacy, the development of skills needed to transition from learning to read to reading to learn, is foundational to later academic success.

Studies suggest that many children have lost momentum on such fundamental skills. The university-based research organization PACE found that reading fluency in second and third graders fell about 30% behind the usual benchmark in a study comparing data from fall 2020 with fall 2019.

"Reading is kind of a gateway to the development of academic skills across all disciplines," said Ben Domingue, an assistant professor in the Graduate School of Education at Stanford University and lead author on the PACE study. "It's a key that opens all of the doors. If a kid can't read effectively by third grade or so, they're unlikely to be able to access content in their other courses." According to the report, time is a critical factor. Children who haven't mastered reading by the time they enter third and fourth grade, when word problems are numerous, and reading comprehension is critical, might be set up to fail.

"Children who fall behind developing reading skills can quickly find themselves struggling to keep up throughout their coursework," according to the report, "and there is thus concern that inadequacies in reading instruction during the pandemic might have cascading effects for years to come." Some educators, however, point out that reading gaps existed long before the pandemic. Don Austin, superintendent at Palo Alto Unified, used the school closures to rethink the district's approach to early literacy in general and phonics in particular.

"I am not sure we were doing a fantastic job of addressing early literacy pre-pandemic," Austin said. "It was worse over Zoom. We have learned a lot about how students read and why some groups historically lag. We used the closures as a time to critically examine our practices and outcomes. The outcomes don't lie. Students who are not at grade level entering fourth grade are at a huge disadvantage." That's one reason some educators believe that earlier is better when it comes to sowing the seeds of literacy. Parents can set the stage for establishing reading as a pleasurable pursuit, educators say. Research shows a correlation between the mere presence of books in the home and academic prowess.

"Most of the literacy programs start too late, way too late," Hawley said. "Getting a 7- or 9-year-old to suddenly love books is not a quick or sure-fire endeavor. Encountering those children in the classroom is one of the things that set me on the path I'm on now." Joy is the magic ingredient, as far as Hawley is concerned. With Reggie, she set aside time to read aloud to the boy one-on-one, with no strings attached. It wasn't until the third time she read to him, without any pressure to sound words out himself, that he slowly began to come around.

"That time I read Roald Dahl's 'The Twits,' which he loved, and he finally dropped his guard," she said. "I remember that he sat back, and he smiled, and I knew I had him. That's when we were off and running. After a good time with one book, it's easier to get buy-in for another." The importance of individualized learning plans for all children is another key, experts say. During the pandemic, some children may have made more reading progress at home than they would have at school, while others faced far more hurdles. Now more than ever, it's best if the strategy fits the child.

"One thing we could take away from this year is that we need lots of different pathways to reach students who respond differently to various instructional models," said Rebecca Silverman, an associate professor in the Stanford Graduate School of Education.

Teachers should try to meet the children where they are instead of using a one-size-fits-all approach, experts say. Making children fill out a reading log, research shows, might make some kids think of reading as a bore instead

of a joy. Other children need that kind of structure and incentives to keep them engaged.

"The goal is that using extrinsic rewards to generate motivation will lead children to become interested in reading and want to do it on their own regardless of whether they are rewarded," Silverman said. "For other children, logging books can feel like bean-counting and become a chore. Subjecting all kids to them regardless of the kind of reader or writer they are could turn some kids off." The PACE research also shows that the pandemic deepened inequities in literacy rates. Students at lower-achieving schools fell further behind, potentially widening the pre-existing achievement gap between rich and poor. If the disparities persist, some worry this setback will continue to hold some behind.

"We're seeing kids in lower-achieving school districts are learning how to read at a slower rate than in years past," Domingue said. "They're learning at a slower rate than their peers at higher-achieving districts." While this trend is worrisome, teachers and parents should focus on cultivating tenacity in children instead of dwelling on learning loss that was beyond their control, some experts say.

Grit is at the core of all aspects of a child's life, experts say, from maintaining a sense of motivation despite the challenges of pandemic life to feeling a sense of hope for the future.

Spreading a feeling of optimism is a key reason Hawley is so determined to bring books into every household. Some years ago, she gave up teaching to run the Berkeley Baby Book project and drive a school bus on the side. She also keeps a box of books stashed in the bus for students to take home.

"My rule is, if you like it, you can keep it," she said. "I was meeting kids on my bus routes who started life in homes without books, while books are falling off shelves all over up in the hills and wealthy areas. That pissed me off. I got fired up to do something about it." One book at a time.