

Summer as an Accelerator for Teacher Professional Growth

SUMMER 2018

Summer has long been considered a time of opportunity, but attempting to understand how that opportunity might relate to learning is a relatively new endeavor. In recent years, a number of researchers have found that rigorous summer programs can accelerate student learning and mitigate existing achievement gaps.¹ But little research has examined the role summer learning can play in leveraging *educator* growth.

BELL (Building Educated Leaders for Life), a national nonprofit, has a strong history of partnering with districts throughout the country to provide evidence-based summer programming consisting of immersive learning that combines academic instruction with fun hands-on enrichment activities. Designed to help scholars improve their academic and social-emotional skills as well as their self-confidence, **the BELL experience depends on capable and excited teachers and leaders.**

Prior to launching its summer experience in partnering communities, BELL provides its own evidence-based professional development that combines virtual and in-person training sessions for teachers and leaders and develops a cadre of local trainers and coaches. Instructional coaches deliver observation and feedback to teachers throughout the summer to help them sharpen their pedagogical skills. And during the BELL experience and beyond, teachers and leaders have access to online resources and training materials through “BELL University.”

In the education sector, there is little evidence that professional development for teachers has a significant and positive impact on their practices, but most research has focused on training that happens *within* schools during the traditional academic year.² BELL’s approach presents an alternative: Training happens in the space “in-between” academic years, it gives participants an immediate and authentic opportunity to practice what has been emphasized, it provides ongoing monitoring and feedback on educator performance, and it is supplemented by ample references and resources. Moreover, the proximity of the BELL experience to the launch of the subsequent academic year raises the question:



Do BELL’s educators transfer what they learn with BELL to the work they do during the summer *and* through the full academic year?

BELL asked Bellwether Education Partners to investigate.

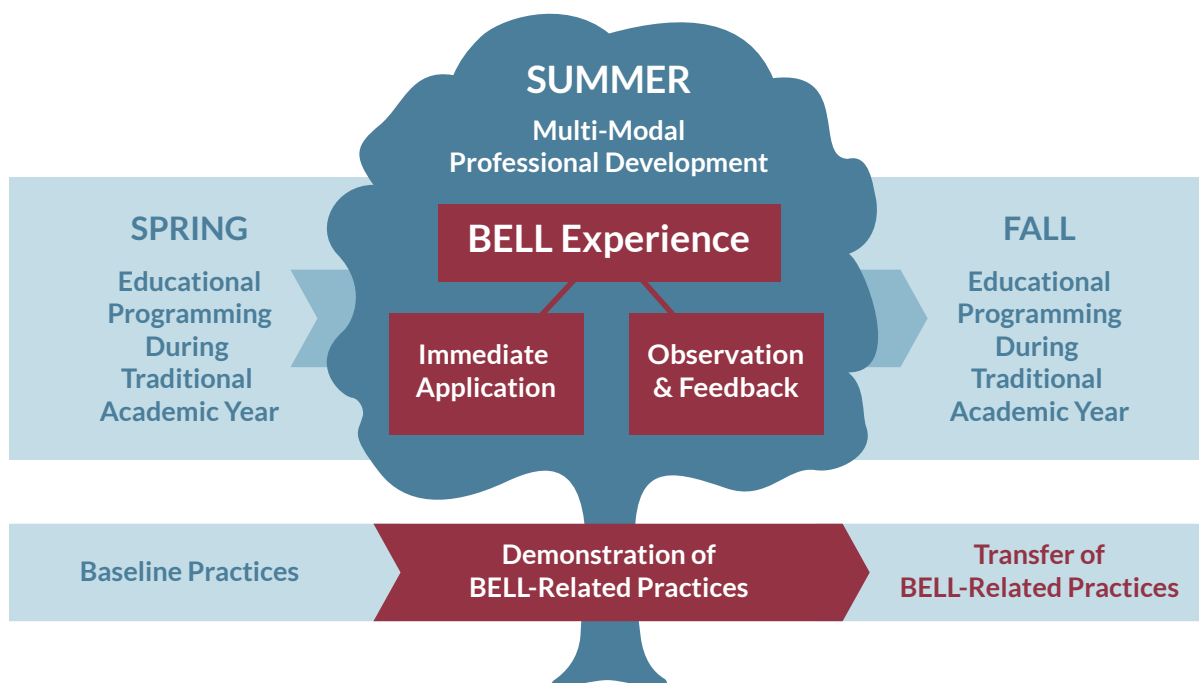
Most professional development relates to the traditional academic year. BELL’s professional development presents an alternative approach.


Exploration

In the fall of 2017, Bellwether Education Partners (“Bellwether”) conducted a rapid turnaround study to explore if, how, and why the practices BELL teaches and emphasizes with its educators are implemented in the summer and beyond. This is a particularly relevant question, as it both responds to the prior tepid findings about teacher professional development and relates to concepts critical to the outcomes of training: transfer of new skills to practice and generalization of new practices to novel contexts. As shown below, BELL hypothesized that due to the strengths and timing of its professional development model, teachers would be likely to apply what they were learning in the summer and would demonstrate evidence of applying new practices to their work in classrooms during the district’s full academic year.

Bellwether interviewed 17 teachers from one of BELL’s partner districts,³ asking them a variety of questions about their experience during the BELL summer program and the subsequent school year. **Their responses spoke to the personally transformative effect of working in BELL’s summer program.**

Every teacher Bellwether interviewed reported that what he or she learned from BELL positively influenced his or her approach to the new school year. Specifically, teachers described experimenting with new instructional strategies that were emphasized by BELL, like integrating growth mindset language, deploying positive behavior management tactics, and allowing students more choice and agency in their learning.



 **100%** of teachers reported that the BELL experience positively influenced their approach to the new school year.

Growth mindset was the most consistent adaptation teachers reported using based on BELL's training; each teacher we interviewed referenced it an average of two times during our interview. Teachers described how this frame of mind affected their own attitude, the way they talked about challenges for themselves and for their students, and their willingness to experiment with other new practices. In essence, learning about and practicing growth mindset was a gateway to trying other new instructional approaches. **Teachers felt supported by BELL's culture of learning and growth for scholars and professionals.**

Teachers also described transferring what they had learned from BELL over the summer to their work during the traditional academic year by using new approaches in their current classrooms, adapting techniques to different grade levels, and volunteering to train colleagues on BELL-related practices. Additionally, being a part of the BELL summer program proved energizing for teachers and renewed their appreciation and passion for teaching. Many interviewees reported that their experience with BELL was invigorating and motivating.

“I think my approach to my teaching is completely different overall. The growth mindset is embedded in everything I do now.”

“It was good to go back to growth mindset and positive behavior and creating a safe learning environment. What is nice about BELL is it provides the opportunity to do all that because BELL is more project-based. During the year it's more drive-by teaching.”

“Even though this is my 34th year in the classroom, BELL was the most magical experience I had in all my teaching years. It was empowering the teachers and the scholars. I hold on to that so when a situation looks dismal, I remember there are things working in education. It was more of an internal fire.”

Bright Spots

Although this study was exploratory in nature, the findings suggest broader implications for teacher practices and professional learning. With research related to professional development for teachers showing generally inconsistent results, shifts in attitudes and practices for BELL's teachers during the

summer experience and into the full academic school year are notable. Teachers may be more likely to adopt new practices when they have intensive training followed by:

- An immediate opportunity to apply what they have learned
- A pedagogical culture that emphasizes consistent instructional expectations, provides ongoing observation and coaching feedback, and cultivates a growth mindset
- Core instructional materials they can reference at will to reinforce learning and provide new ideas

This aligns with, and adds context to, broader research on the benefits of using coaching to improve teachers' instructional practice.⁴

There is some evidence that BELL teachers are carrying their new practices back to their traditional school year work and attempting to scale the practices to those of other teachers in their schools. This implies that intensive professional development in applied settings, like BELL's summer programs, may both enhance individual teacher practice and galvanize teachers to share new approaches with the broader school community.

Overall, this study makes the case that summer is not only an important opportunity to enhance student learning, but *also* an opportunity to accelerate the learning of the educators working with those students.

Additional Research

As promising as these findings are, they are limited to a relatively small number of teachers in one school district and are based on self-reported data. It is important to test the reliability of these findings with more rigorous experimental and/or quasi-experimental methods. In the future, researchers should examine teacher practices before, during, and after the summer program commences to gauge how, and how much, pedagogical practices change and if changes are sustained over time. Researchers should also learn more about the role of constructive feedback from coaches in helping teachers master new approaches and the contexts that support or deter the translation and generalization of new practices into the full academic year. Importantly, BELL should find ways to connect the enhanced practices of teachers it has trained to improved student results in the summer and beyond to build out and validate its Theory of Change.

Finally, we encourage researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to consider the unique timeframe of summer, the “space between” the end of one academic year and the beginning of the next, and how it may be better used to engage both students and educators in a quest to enhance performance and enthusiasm for learning.

Endnotes

- 1 Harris Cooper, *Summer Learning Loss: The Problem and Some Solutions* (Champaign, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, 2003).
- 2 TNTP, “The Mirage: Confronting the Hard Truth About Our Quest for Teacher Development,” 2015, https://tntp.org/assets/documents/TNTP-Mirage_2015.pdf; Jennifer Sloan McCombs et. al, “Making Summer Count: How Summer Programs Can Boost Children’s Learning,” RAND Education, 2011, <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Making-Summer-Count-How-Summer-Programs-Can-Boost-Childrens-Learning.pdf>.
- 3 The district studied is a mid-size urban district in the Northeast, serving approximately eighty percent minority and low-income students. The district was selected for study by BELL because it represented a new BELL partnership site and participating teachers had no prior exposure to BELL’s training.
- 4 Matthew A. Kraft, David Blazar, and Dylan Hogan, “The Effect of Teacher Coaching on Instruction and Achievement: A Meta-Analysis of the Causal Evidence,” review of educational research, last updated February 25, 2018.