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“June Tired”: Back to School During A Pandemic

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If you ask any classroom teacher (or educational audiologist) how they are doing these days, chances are you will hear a version of “I’m June tired.” In a typical year, we come back to school having had a chance to rejuvenate, having perhaps done some professional development that sparked new ideas, looking forward to seeing our students again. By June, we're pretty tired, having spent the year putting many hundreds of kilometers on our cars driving to schools, solving challenging hearing technology problems, supporting classroom and itinerant teachers, meeting with parents and teachers, recommending and fitting countless FM systems, and generally ensuring that every student with auditory difficulties have everything they need to succeed at school. This past spring, we were more than "June tired" in June after 3 months of a crash course in online learning, but I think we imagined (true for me, at least), that we would be back in school in September in a most typical way. However, now the reality is that many (in some areas of the country, most) students are learning online for the foreseeable future. In the spring, in the article Online Learning Success for Students with Hearing Loss, I talked about what online learning should look like for our students; this month, I’d like to share what in-class and online learning is

looking like this year.

Most school staff worked most of the summer attempting to plan for September, in the face of constantly changing policies from government agencies and school boards – unavoidable, but still frustrating. Basic questions such as whether students would even be at school or would be learning online were not answered until almost the start of the year. Fielding questions from parents, students, and school staff to support students with hearing loss has been difficult when we have not had answers ourselves. At this point, most school boards are offering parents a choice of online or in-class learning, often with the option to switch at specified points in the school year. Each learning environment offers its unique challenges for students with hearing loss, and so, educational audiologists and teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing must be prepared to support students in all learning environments.

Challenges with In-Person Learning

Students who are returning to regular classrooms in person this year face a different learning environment, one in which teachers are encouraged to have students outside as much as possible, where there are lines on the floor to direct them on where to walk, where their desks are physically separated, where they are not allowed to hug a friend or share a snack at lunch, where classes such as music are either suspended or severely curtailed, and where you can't see your teacher smile at you. Some teachers have made up buttons with pictures of themselves without masks that they wear on their shirts each day so that students can see what they look like. For a student with hearing loss, adapting to a new teacher each year can have its challenges; imagine if you don't even know what your teacher looks like.

Masks

Masks are required for all teachers and most students in all jurisdictions in Canada. In Ontario, school boards have generally adopted policies that require the use of surgical masks for all teachers, and usually surgical masks plus face shields for kindergarten teachers and anyone working close to students (such as an educational assistant). Students from grades 4 to 12 are generally required to wear face coverings from home, while younger students may or may not be required to wear masks. Recognizing the challenges to speech perception caused by both the physical barrier to sound and the reduction of visual cues, educational audiologists and teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing began advocating for the provision of masks with clear plastic for educators working with these students. Unfortunately, what seemed like a simple solution, the clear mask, has turned out to be anything but. Clear masks of any construction (as anyone who has worn one can attest) are heavier, hotter, more difficult to adjust to your face, and are prone to fogging up (sometimes to the point where the mask becomes wet and uncomfortable). Research on the differences in speech transmission with different types of masks has not proven to be consistent. Clear masks would be expected to have a greater impact on speech transmission, yet the degree to which this is true has shown to vary across research studies. This makes it difficult to determine what we should be recommending to educators. Parents understandably often advocate strongly for teachers to use clear masks, but we must factor in working conditions for teachers who are already under tremendous stress. Parents have sometimes advocated for clear masks such as the Mingle Mask, which are excellent for speechreading but not at all safe for protection from virus transmission. School boards must make decisions based on safety first. What we are learning is that the answer to which type of mask is best for a particular student is a very individual one,

depending on the student, the teacher, and the classroom learning environment.

FM Systems

FM systems are more important than ever, given the arrangements to promote physical distancing in classrooms, and the use of masks by teachers. Infection control has emerged as the primary issue with FM systems, however. FM system manufacturers stepped up to the plate early to source and supply disinfecting supplies, and to publish protocols on effective cleaning. The fact remains, though, that passing a transmitter from one teacher to another (for example, in middle or high school) is problematic without careful disinfection. Meeting the increased requests for each teacher to have his/her lanyard (which are very difficult to disinfect) has been a challenge, yet we cannot expect educators to use hearing technologies unless they feel confident that it is safe to do so. The use of pass-around microphones for classmates to use is generally not possible both because of difficulty in disinfecting them between each student, and because teachers are discouraged from walking around and moving close to students (although we are still searching for innovative ideas that might allow the safe use such microphones).

Service Delivery

Service delivery by educational audiologists and itinerant teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing is always provided according to student need; however, this year this is complicated by school board directives on school visits. Many school boards have restricted itinerant staff to visit one school per day (when we often visited 3-4 in the past), and have directed that services be provided virtually instead of in person whenever possible. This has required us to be creative and flexible for services such as fitting new FM systems and in-servicing teachers, and troubleshooting equipment problems. However, it is understandably frustrating and upsetting for parents of students who typically receive a high level of direct service, to see a significant reduction in the amount of face to face time their student receives from educational audiologists or itinerant teachers.

Challenges with Online Learning

All of the challenges with online learning described in the previous article continue to be problematic, from lack of access to technology such as good internet and hardware such as Chromebooks and tablets to difficulty seeing and hearing during live online teaching. In Ontario, the Ministry of Education has mandated that at least 50% (and preferably more) of the school day for online students consist of face to face virtual instruction via Zoom, Google Meet, etc. Face to face instruction is certainly the more effective choice from a pedagogical perspective, but also means that students with hearing loss spend a large part of the day needing to hear, interact and learn in a virtual environment where it may be difficult to hear and see the teacher clearly, whose face is in a small box onscreen to share learning materials via Share Screen. Classmates may or may not have video turned on. While it is necessary to allow students to do this for privacy and comfort issues, it does make participating in a classroom discussion more challenging when the student must rely on an auditory-only signal and/or following along with questions and discussions happening in a chat room.

Many school boards are allowing parents to switch their children from online to in-person learning, or vice versa, at designated times of the year. However, this means that students not only need to adapt to a completely different learning environment but most likely, a different teacher and different classmates (likely from schools across the district) since most boards have "virtual

schools" that are separate from brick-and-mortar schools.

The Hybrid Model

Some school boards are providing a “hybrid model” which, in my opinion, combines the worst aspects of in-person learning with the worst aspects of online learning. In a hybrid model, the teacher teaches in a classroom of in-person students, while simultaneously teaching to online students who are “zooming in” to the live class. For in-person students with hearing loss, this means that teachers are required to teach the students in front of them while juggling multiple forms of technology (ensuring online students are on Zoom, monitoring their questions, trying to keep themselves within camera range so that online students don’t lose them, and fixing the inevitable technology glitches that happen during videoconferencing, while also needing to use some kind of remote microphone for the “host” online learning computer, on top of their PPE). This means that attention is diverted from in-person students, including being able to monitor comprehension for the student with hearing loss. Adding a personal FM system or sound field to this setup is crucial for the deaf or hard of hearing student, but usually means wearing two transmitters for the teacher. Because pass-around microphones are almost impossible to use in a live classroom because of COVID concerns, the student with hearing loss will have a hard enough time accessing peer comments. If an online student asks a question, the in-class student can't hear that comment from a distance, from the speaker of a laptop.

For the online student in the hybrid model, the one advantage that online learning offers (no masks for teachers and students), disappears since masks must be worn for the in-class students. Classrooms are not set up like professional recording studios, with an array of microphones and cameras, and so, teachers will invariably move out of camera range of the online students, eliminating all visual cues. Online students will likely be able to see their online classmates, but will not be able to see the in-class students, meaning that unless a teacher repeats a question or comment, there is virtually no chance that the online students can hear the in-class discussion.

How Can We Support Students?

Educational audiologists and teachers of the deaf and hard of hearing are coping as best we can, as are all audiologists and teachers. This is the time when we need to make use of every decibel provided by various types of hearing technology, though. Audiologists, both clinical and educational, have the specialized expertise to explain how to maximize hearing technology, whether that be traditional FM systems at school or using streamers or remote microphones at home to interface with computer technology. Many parents and students already have access to assistive technology through their hearing technologies, such as streamers, remote microphones, patch cords, or apps, but may not know how to use them effectively, or even understand the possibilities that these technologies can offer. As always, good communication between clinic and school is crucial, to collaborate on potential hearing solutions for a particular student, and to ensure that school staff has up to date information. We are all creating many new ways of thinking and doing that will carry us into a post-COVID world, but in the meantime, taking care of ourselves and others should be one of our most important priorities.