

Is Learning “Lost” When Kids Are Out of School?

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Anguish and even anger are entirely appropriate reactions to the fact that Covid-19 infection rates are still too high in most areas to permit the safe reopening of schools. Not only do many of our kids miss their friends and the chance to make new ones, but school attendance is a prerequisite for millions of parents to go to work. Also, schools provide healthy meals, which matters in a country with appalling levels of poverty and hunger.

The lockdown is bad enough. Must we also deal with the fear that children who aren't going to school are destined to fall behind academically?

Not necessarily. The research that fuels dire warnings, which largely extrapolates from claims about “summer learning loss” (SLL), is much less persuasive than most people realize. For example, Paul T. von Hippel at the University of Texas at

Austin looked carefully last year at a foundational study on SLL in low-income students and discovered he was unable to replicate its findings, partly because of problems with its methodology, such as a failure to adjust for the difficulty level of the questions.

More important, none of the research on this topic actually shows a diminution in *learning* – just a drop in standardized test scores (in some subjects, in some situations, for some kids).

By now we shouldn't be surprised that older studies on SLL, along with attempts to apply it to our current situation, uncritically conflate the results of standardized tests with broader concepts like learning, achievement, educational excellence, or academic success. After all, many politicians, journalists, parents, and even educators make the same mistake.

But as numerous analyses have shown, standardized tests are not just imperfect indicators; they measure what matters least about teaching and learning. And their flaws aren't limited to specific tests or to how often they're administered or to the way their results are used. Standardized testing itself, particularly when exams are timed or consist primarily of multiple-choice questions, mostly tell us about two things: the socioeconomic status of the population being tested and the amount of time that's been spent training students to master standardized tests.

It is entirely possible to raise scores without improving the quality of teaching and learning at all, which means that a bump in those scores isn't particularly meaningful. Worse, concerted efforts to raise scores often have the effect of *lowering* the quality of teaching and learning, which means that improved test results may actually be bad news. Indeed, several studies have found that higher scores can signify shallower thinking.

Standardized testing simultaneously overestimates students who are just skilled test-takers and underestimates talented thinkers who aren't. Sadly, these flawed scores are still widely used to evaluate students, teachers, and schools, which makes them hard to ignore, at least for the time being. But we should view skeptically any claims about education based on these scores – including the supposedly negative effects of missing school.

So, too, for those who are rightly concerned about race- or class-based “achievement gaps”: If these gaps are defined mostly by test results, the goal will be to narrow the test-score gap, which may *widen* the gap in high-quality instruction and deep learning. Anyone who warns that poor children will suffer disproportionately from closed schools may be romanticizing what was really going on in their schools. The pressure to raise test scores exacerbates an already disturbing dynamic by which the rich get richer and the poor get worksheets.

But is there a *real* academic “slide” from being out of school, as judged by high-quality, nonstandardized assessments? The honest answer is: We just don't know. To its credit, the meta-analysis that's still the most widely cited source on the topic, conducted by Harris Cooper and his colleagues, was accurately titled “The Effects of Summer Vacation on Achievement Test Scores,” not “...on Learning.” But even given that narrow focus, it's noteworthy that the declines were mostly confined to “factual and procedural knowledge” such as “math computation and spelling skills.”

In fact, some studies have shown that the capacity for thinking not only isn't lost over the summer but may show greater gains than during the school year. As Peter Gray at Boston College, who reviewed some of that research, puckishly proposed, “Maybe instead of expanding the school year to reduce a summer slide in calculation, we should expand summer vacation to reduce the school-year-slide in reasoning.”

What, after all, does it mean to say that children can “lose what they’ve learned”? True, time away from school may entail less exposure to academic content, but that shouldn’t be equated with – nor does it imply the absence of – intellectual development. (Similarly, let’s not forget that time away from school doesn’t mean kids can’t flourish in all sorts of other ways: emotionally, physically, artistically, socially, and morally.) Too often, schooling consists of cramming bits of knowledge into students’ short-term memories – by means of lectures, textbooks, worksheets, quizzes, and homework – all enforced with grades. Many of these facts and skills are indeed forgotten, but that doesn’t mean that being out of school is calamitous. Rather, it suggests that we should reexamine what too often takes place *in* school.

Suppose our kids end up missing a full year of school. When they finally return, they may be unable to recall some of what they were told: the six stages of cell division, or the definition of a simile, or the approved steps for doing long division. Heck, they’ll forget even more facts once they’ve graduated. (Haven’t you?) But over the course of a summer or a year spent at home, they are much less likely to forget how to set up an experiment to test their own hypothesis (if, when they were last at school, they had the chance to *do* science), or how to write a story that elicits a strong reaction from a reader (if they had been invited to play with prose with that goal in mind), or what it *means* to divide one number into another (if they were helped to understand mathematical principles from the inside out).

Warnings about academic loss are not just dubious; they’re dangerous. They create pressure on already-stressed-out parents to do more teaching at home – and, worse, to do more of the most traditional, least meaningful kind of teaching that’s geared toward memorizing facts and practicing lists of skills rather than exploring ideas. Parents may just assume this is what instruction is supposed to look like, partly

because that's how they were taught (and no one ever invited them to rethink this model). And if standardized tests rather than authentic kinds of assessment will eventually be used to evaluate their children, parents, like teachers, will be inclined to do what is really just test prep.

We've been here before. Claims of slippage in reading proficiency over the summer have led to an awful lot of kids, disproportionately Black and Latino, being sentenced to highly structured remedial summer programs. Richard Allington, a professor at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville who specializes in this issue, points out that such programs, or summer homework assignments, aren't necessary or even sensible. Rather, he and his colleagues recommend "easy and continuing access to self-selected books for summer reading"—a solution that's also much less likely to cause kids' *interest* in reading – a key predictor of proficiency – to evaporate.

When schools are finally able to open their doors again safely, let's not return to the *status quo ante covid*, with its emphasis on the kind of test-focused instruction that can be lost. The good news – at a time when we're all desperate for some – is that when the learning was meaningful to begin with, it doesn't slip away.

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