

Pulled Up Short with Stanton Wortham

Did school children learn more during the pandemic?

Featuring Rebecca Lowenhaupt with Stanton Wortham (host) and Vincent Cho (commentator)

Original Air Date: May 10, 2021

Stanton Wortham 0:08

Welcome to Pulled Up Short. This is a podcast that's devoted to a particular kind of activity, where we're told some new perspectives on things that cause us to stop, to be pulled up short, and think a little bit about something that we believed but which turns out not to be true, or at least that we need to reconsider based on some new information that we've been given. This is an important thing to do. It requires that we recognize deeply held presuppositions, that we entertain the possibility that our typical ways of understanding are incomplete or distorting. We need to be open to questions and alternative formulations of basic issues that we tend to take for granted. We have to be willing to consider alternative ways of thinking. This requires a commitment to imagination, to seeing the world in new ways, a commitment to systematically inquiring based on evidence and reason, wherever it leads, a commitment to being open, to moving beyond dogmatism, and considering alternative beliefs and practices, or commitment to conversation to listening deeply to others and inquiring jointly.

So in each episode, we're going to hear from someone who has an insight or something we don't typically think about that requires us to be pulled up short, to rethink something that we tend to take for granted. And we hope that you'll enjoy.

Welcome to another episode of Pulled Up Short. This week, we're happy to have with us Becca Lowenhaupt, a professor at the Lynch School of Education and Human Development at Boston College. We also have as a discussant, Vincent Cho, also from the Lynch School of Education and Human Development. We're grateful to have both of you here with us today, and we're excited to hear what Becca wants to share with us about learning loss. I take it, Becca, that you have a somewhat unusual view of learning loss or the lack of loss that's been going on for kids during the pandemic.

Becca Lowenhaupt 2:13

I do Stanton, and thank you so much. I was thinking a lot about the term "learning loss" as I hear people around me starting to think about how we can address learning loss as we plan for this next year of school, in light of the pandemic. So as schools and districts are preparing to reopen, I've heard policymakers refer to the need to confront learning loss that has happened during the pandemic. In some cases, it will have been more than a full school year that kids have been out of school completely, learning remotely at home. And during that time, with all the problems and interruptions of online learning, students have missed out on most, if not all, the formal learning

that would have happened if they had been in school during this year. And so with this interruption, there is worry about a lost generation of students who have fallen behind. And many policymakers are talking about how we need to assess students to quantify this learning loss. Many are planning to require summer school to try to catch up on lost time, or find other ways to sort of refill the knowledge that has been lost during the pandemic, with this urgent push now this spring to reopen schools in person as soon as possible.

And hearing this discourse and hearing the efforts that focus on learning loss, I've just been thinking a lot about that term as a descriptor of the time we're living in. I'm just starting to wonder like, what is it that is being lost? And are we talking about falling behind and skills that we need to progress to the next level? Are we thinking about their ability to get ready for college? Or do well on the next test? Like what is really at the heart of this concern related to learning loss?

Stanton Wortham 3:57

I certainly recognize what you're talking about that policymakers, teachers, kids, parents, everybody seems to be talking about learning loss and how the pandemic has caused kids who have had to learn virtually to fall behind. There seems to be a lot of emotion, a lot of angst that's attached to this. They're talking about, not only loss of subject matter learning, but also opportunity to see their friends and develop socially and extracurricular opportunities and so forth and so on. So, you agree that some things have been lost, right?

Becca Lowenhaupt 4:30

Absolutely. I do agree. And I agree with many of the parents, myself included, that see the pandemic in relation to what's been lost and this sort of sense of grieving about the ways that our lives have been disrupted during this time. But I've been thinking a lot specifically about what it means to characterize the year as learning loss, as a gap in education for our children, and thinking also about the assumptions that go into this focus on how we address that loss. So what do we think kids have been doing during this time, if not learning? And what about the valuable learning that has been happening in this window of off time, where kids have been navigating a very different daily life?

At home right now, students are learning. They're navigating really challenging experiences. Many of them are managing their own assignments, their own schedules, and work. Some are participating more in the household. They're responsible now for taking care of young siblings or elders in the house while their parents are at work. They're learning about resilience as they hear the news and see how so much of their lives has been disrupted. They're learning how to be flexible and how to cope with uncertainty.

So I don't think we really want to claim that these experiences are not deep and powerful sources of learning and growth. In fact, don't we hope that students' experiences in school during a normal year would facilitate some of these important skills? And so it seems like finding a way to examine what has been learned and think about our priorities about what counts as learning... I guess I'm just asking us to consider what assumptions we have about education when we see virtual learning as somehow holding our children back. And if we buy into this year as one only of learning loss, that really requires us to accept a very narrow understanding of learning, and one which is limited to those boundaries of school. So to me, learning loss feels like a misleading interpretation, given all the learning that I see happening, not just for our kids, but for all of us, as we navigate this unprecedented time.

Stanton Wortham 6:48

I see I'm starting to understand where you're going, that learning loss and the decision whether or not to reopen schools here in the spring of 2021, has become so politicized. And on one side, people are saying, "There's huge learning loss of kids aren't in school, we have to open them." And on the other side, people are saying, "Well, we agree there's learning loss, but it's too risky to open schools." So everybody is assuming that there is this learning loss... that you have to be in school to learn, or there are huge gaps that open up. And I guess what you're doing is trying to help us understand that maybe there's learning that goes on at home, and maybe we should rethink what it is we're after when we talk about kids learning. So tell me a little more about what kind of learning you think kids are engaging in at home.

Becca Lowenhaupt 7:34

Sure, yeah. I mean, I've seen my own kids going through this. I have middle school aged children. And, you know, thinking about my older child who has really been disappointed by a lack of structure and kind of adjusting to having less meaningful tasks to do. She assigned herself the task of drawing a series of portraits, and she pushed herself to improve a little bit with each one, trying to do you know, one or two portraits a week. She also taught herself, using YouTube videos and trial and error and her younger sibling, she taught herself how to apply makeup, you know, something that I definitely would not be able to teach her, but something that she wanted to learn. She figured out how to do it. My younger child, who really did and has had a hard time, has always flourished with the social aspect of school, with seeing friends and catching up with teachers. And so they set up regular meetings online with friends. One in particular, they met every day at the end of each day. They organized it. They managed the schedule. They came together to talk about what they had learned in online school, to gossip, and watch movies together.

So in both cases, my kids have learned something, something about what helped them cope with a difficult time, the kinds of routines and goals that made them feel good about their day to day lives, and figured out how they could make themselves feel better when they were having a tough time. I'm also thinking about care, and the importance of care during this time, and how many kids have been involved in a kind of caregiving that they haven't done before. I don't just mean helping around the house or babysitting siblings, but also taking care of adults who are suffering. You know, we've all had an emotional year, and the kids in the family have found ways to uplift their parents and be supportive and engage in caregiving in new ways. So those are just a few examples that I've thought of. And I do recognize, you know that I'm in a very privileged situation here, but I have seen how the kids around us are growing during this time.

Stanton Wortham 9:47

Okay. I understand. This certainly seems like a convincing point, that children learn everywhere. They learn a lot at home, and if they're not spending some time on school that they would have been, that doesn't mean they're not learning things. They're just learning different kinds of things in different contexts. I guess now what we have to do is take that back to this question of kids being out of school and learning loss. So given that they're still learning something, how do we make sense of what's not going on in school and how we should react to that? I'm sure you know that there have been lots of conversations about disparities of kids, kids from low income backgrounds, students of color, kids who don't have access to internet for various reasons, who do genuinely seem to be suffering, because they can't access some of the content being offered by the school. You acknowledge that that's going on, right?

Becca Lowenhaupt 10:37

Absolutely. And I don't think I'm advocating that we ignore missed opportunities to learn. I think I'm just trying to reframe it. And I think ultimately, this conversation asks us to reimagine what schooling and learning should be more generally. So Stanton, I think we might use this time to reframe what matters most in formal school, and figure out how to build on the knowledge that students have gained during this time, even those who have not been able to access online school. I think I'm asking us to reconceptualize what learning in school should be and therefore respond differently when we reopen. And maybe we should describe the year as learning continuity, for example. I know policymakers in California have been trying to use that term. Or another perspective that recognizes that valuable learning is happening at home, and might be a good bridge back into the formal academic learning of schooling. I'm thinking that this time has the potential to really change our approaches to teaching and learning. And that includes listening and differentiating what students need, particularly managing to listen to those families that that you refer to who have really had such a tough time during this pandemic.

Stanton Wortham 12:00

I understand. So you're saying that the notion of learning loss, or an educational gap that opens up because of the pandemic, and the interruption of in person schooling presupposes a particular vision of what education is about that you want to challenge. It has this notion that there is a standard curriculum that everybody is supposed to learn in a relatively linear kind of way. And if we don't do that, then we're behind or there's loss. And you're saying that learning is going on all the time, in school and out, and the fact that kids are at home or online in unusual environments, and they may have had an interruption in terms of this linear vision of subject matter learning, doesn't mean that there's something that's been lost, because there's something that's been gained as well. And the kinds of environments where they're learning may have interesting educational resources in them. It's not only possible to learn productive things. It's not only possible to learn things that relate to curricular topics in school, but there's lots of stuff that goes on at home or in local communities that can be relevant. We do have to address this question about gaps, that there are some kids who seem to be disadvantaged by the current situation. We do have to name it or measure it, right, in order to address it.

Becca Lowenhaupt 13:24

I think that we do, yes, but I also think that we might think about measuring it in different ways. You raise the issue of measurement, and there has been a strong argument made for the need for some standardized assessments at this time, in order to figure out where those gaps are so that we can fill them. I think it's safe to assume that students will need some, you know, some follow up work related to those academic subject matter-specific things they may have missed. Yes. But I also think that there are ways to assess that by talking to kids about their experience and learning from kids as we rebuild this coming school year.

One of the thoughts that I keep having is about those students, and you hear the stories of students who have really actually flourished during this time away from school. I've heard the argument made for some students with disabilities who have found ways to adjust their learning more easily in the home environment. I've heard of, for example, African American boys who have had a chance to kind of step outside of the discipline and management systems of schooling. And so there are some positives for some kids that have come from having this break from being in the school environment. I think this is a chance to learn from those kids. What is it about this time that was a relief for them? What is it that they really found worked well for them in terms of learning outside of

school, and then to try to think about ways that we can integrate that aspect of schooling back into the way classrooms reopen, into the way that kids navigate school once we're back in person.

I'm also thinking a lot about the ways that SIFE, or interrupted formal education curriculum that has been developed in working with refugees, those curricula might be a useful resource for us now, as we think about bridging back into the formal learning environment. How do we learn from students about what they have learned and enjoyed and found out about themselves during this time? So I actually think we're embarking on a time where we really need to do some listening, really deep listening to kids, and to families, about their experiences during this time before we jump to measuring the gaps. Let's listen to them, and hear what they feel they've learned during this time.

Stanton Wortham 16:11

This is nice. So you're framing this as an opportunity. The typical view is you learn the curriculum in school, and that's what we're supposed to do. And the learning you're doing elsewhere is either not as good or not relevant to what you're really supposed to be focusing on. And therefore a learning loss means interruption in school and only bad stuff or neutral stuff going on at home. You're saying that actually, the kinds of learning that are going on at home and elsewhere, can be entirely productive, and we have to try to figure out how we might incorporate those, treat them as assets for the school-based learning that we're trying to foster for young people. Tell me, what kinds of policy solutions might we consider in order to take advantage of this new perspective you're offering?

Becca Lowenhaupt 17:02

Yeah, I'm trying to convey here that I think this is a chance to rethink what matters most in schools, which means looking at our standards, looking at how we've set up our curriculum. Would we rather students learn strategies to pursue their own interests and cope with difficult circumstances? Or would we rather spend our time teaching them really specific things like trigonometry? Does it matter if kids learn that pre-determined set of content, if they haven't learned some life lessons about navigating the world?

One idea I've heard is this idea of investing in large scale tutoring. I think it's being called high dosage tutoring, that will allow educators to figure out what students have learned where they are, and then how to move forward on a much more individualized scale than we're used to in schools. Figuring out how to learn from students about their experiences, and then build on those really does require those one-on-one relationships and time to kind of figure that out on a personal level. I've also been, I alluded to this earlier, thinking a lot about this question of assessment timelines. Can we use this as an opportunity to reframe our accountability systems, to emphasize those strategies that really helped kids survive and manage during this difficult year, those socioemotional supports, that self knowledge and metacognition. To me, those skills and knowledge, it's really, that's where we want to focus our assessment and accountability, making sure that schools are helping students shore up those strategies that can really help them during difficult times.

This also includes rethinking grading policies, thinking about what are we really grading when we provide students with feedback? When we give them grades? Are we lifting them up and supporting their learning? Or are we just punishing students in the aftermath of the pandemic? One teacher I was talking with said that she's been really worried that really all she's grading is students' access to the content, as opposed to what their skills really are, as she thinks about her own grading systems.

And I know of several schools and districts that have tried to rethink more equitable grading, given the inequalities that we're seeing during this time.

One more point here is just thinking about the relationship that has been built between many schools and families, thinking about new routines and ways for schools to learn from families about their experiences. During the pandemic, we were forced to set up many new communication structures. Students were talking about how they had one on one conversations with teachers more often, families felt like they were in direct contact both with teachers and school administrators during this time, and schools worked really hard to have more and different ways of reaching out to families. I think that those routines and strategies could stay in place and should stay in place. Even once we're back in person schooling, there's no reason that we shouldn't try to keep all lines of communication open as we transition back.

So I think this conversation asks us to reflect on a broader question, what does it mean to be behind in learning? And why are we conceptualizing it that way? What knowledge and learning are we valuing, and why? And so that's really why I wanted to have this conversation and reflect with you about how we're thinking about learning loss, and how we might reframe it to be much more about the things that we've gained during this time. And how to reframe or reimagine what we think learning should look like as we move into the year ahead.

Stanton Wortham 21:01

Great. So the typical view is, kids are in school, they learn stuff. The pandemic interrupts that they don't learn stuff, and that's loss. And you're adopting a more nuanced view of it that, of course, since kids aren't in school, there is some content they haven't had access to in the same way, and some of that content is important. However, they have had access to lots of other things that they've engaged with, that have helped them learn in various ways at home, online, with people they don't normally have opportunities to engage with.

So first of all, it's not just learning loss, there's also something gained. And second of all, you're saying, we can take our reflections on what they have actually learned during this time and use it to improve what goes on in schools. So we don't just restart schooling the way you would on a typical view of learning loss; we restart schooling, and get them access to important content, but we do it in a way that takes into account the various assets that they have at home, outside school. And that gives them opportunities to change the way that we're teaching them, like subject matter that we typically teach them. Is there anything else you'd like to help listeners think about as we move on in the conversation?

Becca Lowenhaupt 22:17

Well, I just want to be clear that there's no question, this has been a really difficult time of disruption. For most of us, some of us have lost loved ones, all of us have lost time in some form or another. And so using the word loss isn't terrible. I just think it's important to consider what we have learned during this time. You know, in schools, we have a fixation about acquiring certain narrow knowledge and skills and a particular trajectory at a particular pace. But there are so many valuable forms of learning that are not always recognized in formal school, and maybe having come through a year of this, that will help us elevate those forms of learning, you know, even as they accompany some missed formal learning opportunities caused by the pandemic. I hope that we can find ways to really value what we've gained by having this informal learning time over the course of the year.

Stanton Wortham 23:14

Excellent. Well, thanks for sharing that provocative perspective with us. Now, I'd like to bring in Vincent Cho. Vincent, could you please ask a couple of questions of Becca?

Vincent Cho 23:24

Sure. Yeah. I think the first... let's see if this comes out in the form of a question. But I think that part of what Becca is pointing toward is the way in which this term "learning loss" is being used differently by different people. And I feel like learning loss is this political term. It's really easy to latch on to. It's catchy. And you can argue that there's this loss, and so let's get back to school as quickly as possible, let's do the standardized testing as usual, let's do all these things, because we're quantifying, or we'll hope to quantify, certain kinds of losses. But then I also hear this is practical issue of okay, once kids come back, do we really need to think about this in terms of loss? Or can we think about this in terms of improving upon the strengths that students have had? And so I guess my question might be related to: do these two worlds need to speak to each other? Or do, you know, does there need to be a different political argument around learning loss? Or do we just let these people, you know, push what they want to push? Or can practitioners just dig their heads down and say, okay, when the kids come back, let's just do this.

Becca Lowenhaupt 24:43

Well, that's a great point, Vin, and I think one that I've been wondering about as well. I mean, one of the problems is I see some of the political force mobilizing behind, for example, demanding this push forward with the standardized testing. That's an example where I imagine that taking the perspective of learning loss, taking that up as an excuse for pushing forward with these assessments, to me seems potentially damaging to kids and to teachers to really force them to measure themselves and their success against an impossible measure. So thinking, you know, that it makes sense to address learning loss by testing students feels to me, like an unjust use of the term learning loss, and for that reason, I do think we need to push back against it.

The other thing I worry about is that if we promote this idea of learning loss and this race to get back to school as normal, then we miss that window of opportunity to rethink sort of system-wide, and sort of overall rethink, what it is that we think is most valuable about education and the kinds of learning that we want to support in schools. To me, this is a window of opportunity to reimagine and reframe schooling. And if we focus too narrowly on, you know, what specific pieces of information have been lost during this time, then that might lead us to try to jump back in to business as usual in the aftermath of this really major upheaval.

Vincent Cho 26:31

I hear the people who were advocating for testing, I think they would say, "But if we don't test, if we don't quantify this, we can't argue that we need more resources. And we can't break the status quo without more resources." So what would you say to them?

Becca Lowenhaupt 26:47

Well, I guess I would say that there are a lot of ways... I think there are a lot of ways to argue for more resources. And I would also say that we can have the tests later, but we don't need the tests right now. I think all you need to do is talk to people and find out, you know, all the vast array of responses that are needed to support kids and families post-pandemic. I really don't think that the resources will be tied to the tests.

Vincent Cho 27:25

One of the other things you touched upon involved, you didn't put it this way, but what I heard you say was something along the lines of: the pandemic and remote learning and hybrid learning -- it's affected different kids in different ways. And there's a lot of "Well, depends upon the circumstances." So maybe there are some kids who have, I don't know, been out in the woods and learn to play with fire in a responsible way, and learn to take care of family members, and they've gotten to know family members they wouldn't have known. But my experience has been... I, you know, my daughter, she's more anxious, now. Her teacher has stoked anxiety in the way that he teaches. And she's been punching pillows, and kids have zoom fatigue. And maybe they've learned to manipulate their parents more. Or maybe that's just me giving in more. So I think it matters what model of or what learning experience they've had and maybe what age the students are. How do you see, and this is in terms of like, the impact on their social emotional health, right? So how do you see, how do you see schools be able to pivot quickly with all these different... I don't know what happened to the kid, if they've done well or not? If they've learned to dismantle inequity, because they were out this summer? Or if they were, you know, hiding the bed, like in my family? So how do schools figure out quickly like a formative, like a formative assessment, to get back into that, to be able to help students when they come back?

Becca Lowenhaupt 29:08

Yeah, I love that you brought up the term formative assessment, because I think that's exactly what we need right now, is to create quick and dirty ways to figure out where kids are at. It's easy for me as a scholar sitting here in my, in my office to say, "You know, we need to listen to kids." But I think the point is, we need tools to listen to the kids and assessments to listen to them and figure out what their needs are at this point, what they've gained, and also, as you highlight so powerfully, what they've lost during this time. The best thing I can say or my only response right now is that we need to have some tools, and we also need to build and strengthen that relationship between the educator and the student in a very personalized way. And that does require resources, as you pointed out. I brought up tutoring. I think finding ways to kind of have only a handful of kids per adult, so that one adult can really quickly assess and identify what the students experiences have been, will be really essential. I don't know if I exactly answered your question. But I think it's really important to highlight just how valuable it will be to find ways to get to know what kids' experiences have been, as we kind of reopen and start reconnecting with students.

Vincent Cho 30:47

I'm worried for the schools who are going to hear this now. And they're going to say, "I only got a few months to figure this out so that we know if we should come back early, and give kids more time as they miss all this time. If we should, you know, invest in summer school in a different way." And some would say, "This is just more of the same colonialist curriculum that wasn't working for kids in the first place." And so yeah, how, how quickly... Do you see this happening at a district level of school level, a quick response? Or are we just too far behind on it?

Becca Lowenhaupt 31:23

That's a great question. I've been mulling this over. You know, here in Massachusetts, we've been really focused on reopening schools in April, which means that if schools do come back in person, they'll have a few months, and then be heading off again for summer. Part of me just feels that that time might be used to really focus in on and assess where students are, what kinds of supports they need, and then take the time over the summer to try to put those resources in place. And to rethink

the structures so that when we hit the ground running in September, we're able to have a kind of new, or maybe not new but adapted, vision of what support looks like in school. I'm imagining that students will need a lot more access to, for example, mental health supports. They'll need more time probably in smaller groups. I'm just thinking about, you know, my own self. I was recently in a room for the first time with ten people, and it felt really overwhelming. So I think that there are ways that we really might take this opportunity of the Spring, if we indeed are able to be in person, to kind of assess and figure out what we want things to look like come Fall.

Stanton Wortham 32:48

Thanks very much for bringing us this timely and interesting idea, Becca. We appreciate you and Vincent giving us your time and insights. That's the end of this episode. Next week, we're looking forward to hearing from Greg Fried, who is going to try to convince us that we do not really have free will. If you like the podcast, please subscribe. So long.