

Pulled Up Short with Stanton Wortham

Did school children learn more during the pandemic?

Featuring Rebecca Lowenhaupt with Stanton Wortham (host) and Vincent

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

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?

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

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

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?

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.

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

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.