

Instead of focusing on what was lost, schools should honour what students gained during the COVID-19 pandemic

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FULL TEXT

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During the pandemic, two similar education stories have dominated headlines. One laments that schooling last year was a total disaster; the other portends that schooling this year will, once again, be a total disaster.

The more sympathetic of these stories include parents who refer to a lost year in their child's education, or valid concerns around health and safety in school settings. The more invidious cite annual dollar amounts of future earnings lost to this generation of students, tracking educational outcomes on a list of yearly receivables: You may have survived a plague that killed millions, but you will never be as wealthy as you could have been.

Let me offer a more nuanced bottom line that will not be news to many teachers and students. The reality is that a lot of meaningful teaching and learning happened in Canadian schools last year, both online and in person, and it will happen again starting this September.

There is no question that scrambling systems left marginalized and special-needs students more vulnerable - these groups should now be the focus of investment or any accelerated learning efforts. For the majority of students, however, learning was disrupted, often imperfect, but not lost. For that, credit is due to strong public systems, the good work of adults and allies at school and at home, and the adaptability of the young.

Here are some terms for parents and educators to avoid this fall: fallen behind, catching up, closing the gap. And here is one to eradicate from the lexicon: learning loss.

Learning loss is a fuzzy concept in need of problematizing. It sometimes refers to a dip in knowledge experienced by students over an extended break from school (like a regular summer holiday), but what it usually means during COVID-19 is academic growth that is not achieved, often measured in averaged test scores for math and reading that are benchmarked to prepandemic outcomes, then converted into the number of months students are behind. As if learning were a kind of throughput.

In the context of K-12 education in Canada, learning loss is at best an exaggeration and at worst a punitive lie. One obvious challenge is that it paints the student pandemic experience with the same sloppy brush when it varies widely from province to province, district to district, and school to school. But the biggest problem with the learning loss narrative is that it pathologizes a generation of students based on scant evidence (usually from other places in the world) and a shallow understanding of what young people may have gained or lost during pandemic learning.

Take, for example, the cohort of young Canadians from our research at Maximum City who readily admit they were disengaged from school last year but report being more engaged in life, more steeped in social purpose to better the world around them. Would you rather have kids who can expand whole numbers using powers of 10, or kids who want to save the world? Both is a possible answer, but one is a skill that can be learned in due time, while the other is a quality to nurture that could secure the future of a society in deepening trouble on multiple major fronts. This subgroup of students - bored with school but passionate about social causes and making a difference - occupy a liminal or threshold space in their development. They can only be re-engaged in school through

responsive and creative methods, not drilling and testing.

Learning loss and similar agendas are taskmasters who unfairly target the confidence of all students. They point to the face of a mountain that students are climbing in a storm, then tell them to pick up the pace to keep up with the last group who ascended in perfect weather. The proponents of this dismal trajectory would have school start this fall with catching up, filling the learning gap, testing, and a focus on numeracy and literacy. Some students will respond to this additional pressure to perform but it is precisely the wrong approach to re-engage them fully in school life and a love of learning. It disrespects the learning that did take place at school and beyond, and ignores the fact that some things about school lost during the pandemic were actually worth losing. It seeks to oppress and control rather than integrate and inspire.

So what should schools do to start the year? They should build on strategies that proved effective last year, forget the things that didn't work before and during COVID, and drill down on relationships and belonging to ease the stress and anxiety of a newly uncertain return to school. Instead of focusing on what was lost, schools should honour what students gained during the pandemic and meet them where they are in their different experiences. Schools should get students moving again through physical activity and play. They should give up a little control of prescriptive curricula and have students share their new knowledge and ideas for a chaotic world. And ask students how they learned differently, how they know themselves and the world around them better than a year and a half ago.

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DETAILS

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