The COVID-19 Learning Loss: Fact or Stigma?

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In April 2020, the discourse surrounding the COVID-19 learning loss began. Researchers predicted student learning loss due to school closures, with estimated declines in math and reading during the pandemic (Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020). To follow, hundreds of billions of dollars have been allocated to address learning loss (Jordan, 2022). To be clear, the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been extreme and omnipresent. However, the stigma of labeling a generation of students from a deficit-based lens does not offer the support sorely needed in school systems (Zhao, 2021). As social workers, we must be cognizant of the ramifications of yet another stigmatizing label cast on students.

Although results varied—not all were negative—learning loss has been inconsistently defined as student learning deficits in math and reading during the pandemic (Kuhfeld, Soland, Tarasawa, Johnson, Ruzek, & Lewis, 2020; Kuhfeld, Soland, Tarasawa, Johnson, Ruzek, & Liu, 2020a, 2020b; Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020; Kuhfeld, Tarasawa, et al., 2020). Education consulting groups led the dissemination of learning loss discourse by providing data, funding reports, and promoting reform through in-house services (i.e., increased testing and tutoring; Dorn et al., 2020a, 2020b; Kuhfeld, Soland, Tarasawa, Johnson, Ruzek, & Lewis, 2020; Kuhfeld, Soland, Tarasawa, Johnson, Ruzek, & Liu, 2020a, 2020b; Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020; Kuhfeld, Tarasawa, et al., 2020). As reform ensues to address learning loss, social workers must help mitigate the harm caused by the deficit-based portrayals of youth.

Three factors illuminate concern regarding the deficit-based depictions of student learning during the pandemic: (1) enduring educational inequities, (2) stigma of learning loss, and (3) overshadowing of student growth. First, it has become increasingly documented that students navigate an enclave of educational barriers cultivated by deficit-based ideologies (H. R. Love & Beneke, 2021). For instance, high rates of exclusionary discipline, including suspensions, expulsions, arrests, and referrals to law enforcement, continue to affect students, disproportionately excluding Black and Brown students (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). This punitive and pervasive disciplinary system has also increased reliance on school surveillance mechanisms, including police, security cameras, metal detectors, and classroom surveillance (Casella, 2018). Further, many school-based policies utilize a deficit-based lens to define young people as "problems" instead of mediating systemic shortcomings (i.e., zero-tolerance policies; Harper, 2020; Shalaby, 2017). Second, the stigmatizing nature of learning loss discourse may affect students in unique and varied ways (Zhao, 2021). Third, during the pandemic, students developed skills—in out-of-school time spaces—that are not measurable by standardized tests and curricular standards (Ettekal & Agans, 2020). The shortsighted and blanketed portrayal of learning loss circumvents recognition of student development that consistently occurs outside of schools. Furthermore, it diminishes students' lived realities and experiences while failing to consider their perspectives. Youth do not need another deficit-based label as they endure challenges stemming from the pandemic (Zhao, 2021).

Regardless of whether learning loss is validated scientifically, students still need holistic support, and social workers are strategically positioned to provide compassion. Young people often navigated insecurities before the pandemic (e.g., those related to housing, financial, food, mental health, and physical health; Bartlett & Vivrette, 2020). Meanwhile, the pandemic may have exacerbated challenges (we are being cautious not to overgeneralize), which underscores the need for inclusive levels of support from social workers (Mitchell, 2021). Herein, we provide strategies to help build

support, enhance well-being, and promote innate student resilience.

The learning loss discourse contributes negatively to the stigma children already experience and may further shape educator biases (Zhao, 2021). Fortunately, the ecological lens of the school social worker (SSW) offers a framework to counteract the deficit-based constructions of youth through schoolwide support with a structural emphasis (Crutchfield et al., 2020; Frey et al., 2012). Further, we align with those emphasizing the need for a paradigm shift in our understanding of student development (Hess, 2019; James et al., 2021). For instance, all students have innate capacities to be resilient, yet we continue interacting with them through deficit-based frameworks (James et al., 2021). This paradigm shift in how we observe, interact, and engage with students is of paramount importance. Framing youth positively rather than as "at risk" can help to nurture innate student capacities (Johnson & McKay-Jackson, 2016; H. R. Love & Beneke, 2021).

To value strengths and bolster support for students and families, we must begin by acknowledging and hearing their experiences. Culturally responsive, antiracist, and antioppressive practices and pedagogies offer strategies to engage students, promote strengths, enhance learning, and build resilience (Galloway et al., 2019; Hess, 2019; B. L. Love, 2019). One strategy at the heart of the strength-based movement that is particularly useful in amplifying youth voice is the counternarrative. Based on a foundational tenet of critical race theory, counternarratives can help emphasize historically underrepresented voices to provide new perspectives and effect social change (Hess, 2019; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Emblematic examples of the inclusion of youth voices are on the rise across classrooms, in domains of science (Gonsalves, 2014), mathematics (James et al., 2021), music education (Hess, 2019), and hip-hop-based education (B. L. Love, 2019). These initiatives have proven that an emphasis on strength- and asset-based youth perspectives reimagines schooling for young people by unearthing experiences with learning and bolstering school engagement.

To ensure a paradigm shift in support for youth, SSWs must strengthen their support for teachers. Galloway and colleagues (2019) note how varied frameworks (i.e., antiracist, antioppressive, culturally responsive) are perceived differently and utilized uniquely by educators. For example, they highlight the effectiveness of culturally responsive practices in promoting inclusive strategies and positive relationships; meanwhile, antiracist and antioppressive practices may lead to an enhanced focus toward structural inequities. Further, teachers often bear the brunt of implementation responsibilities and receive little support from SSWs (Morrise, 2020). Therefore, building relationships, establishing communication, and helping to empower and support teachers may strengthen schoolwide support. SSWs are keenly adept at supporting and empowering teachers as they strive to enhance youth voices and improve school climate through inclusive practices and pedagogies (Morrise, 2020).

Meanwhile, SSWs can actively engage with caregivers to strengthen the linkage between home and school to improve outcomes and enhance support. Finigan-Carr and Shaia (2018) suggest enhancing communication with caregivers to help support behavioral and mental health needs, while unearthing structural barriers that may spur educational inequities. Establishing the home–school connection is an imperative strategy for facilitating support (Kelly, 2008).

Finally, cohesive and collaborative school mental health (SMH) is needed to solidify a foundation of schoolwide support. Successful frameworks of SMH can help stimulate and uplift a paradigm centering on young people in a humanizing manner. This includes moving away from deficit-based and at-risk portrayals that pathologize students, justify enhanced punishment and surveillance, and stymie holistic support mechanisms (H. R. Love & Beneke, 2021). Collaborative SMH entails relationship cohesion across professionals, including, but not limited to, social work, psychology, counseling, and nursing. Too often, SMH practitioners face underemployment, navigate siloed roles, compete for administrative buy-in, and are challenged in their time and ability to address structural inequities (Kelly et al., in press; Mitchell et al., 2021). Cohesive SMH mirrors the very principles it wishes to instill, including positive relationships, open communication, equity focus, strength-based perspectives, and interdisciplinary behavioral, social, and mental health services (Kelly et al., in press). To do this, schools must reinvest financially and empathetically in SMH with a social justice lens that spans from micro- to macro-level practice. In doing so, SMH practitioners can build support for youth

mental health and well-being, and strengthen restorative efforts to dismantle oppressive structures and policies (Ball & Skrzypek, 2020; Crutchfield et al., 2020).

The road ahead may be challenging, but we can harness support by reevaluating student strengths, valuing their learning, and recognizing their skill development and resilience. Although compassion, care, and love for students are not a tall order, they can mean the world to so many students as they navigate through their childhood, the school system, and a turbulent society. **CS**

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