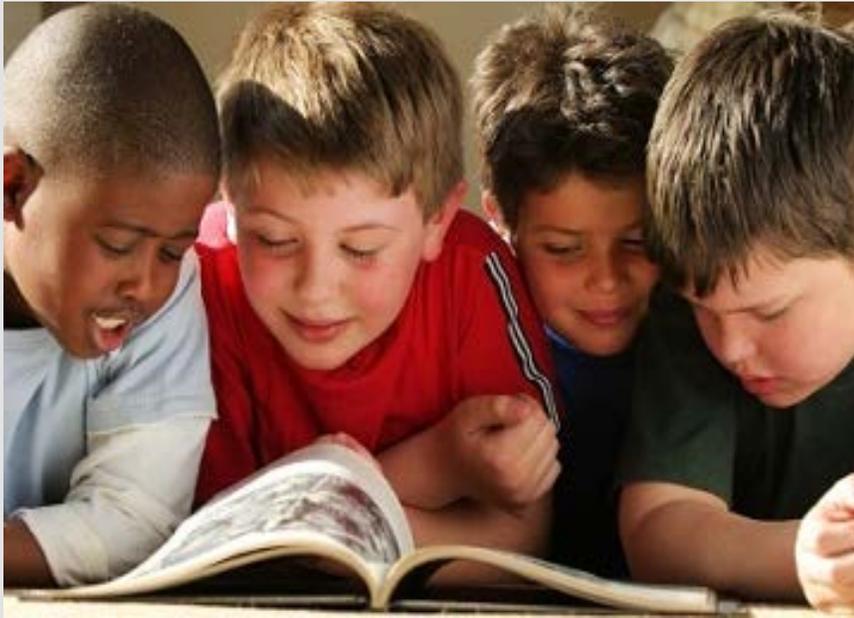




Equity Dispatch

Summer: A Vacation from Learning?
A Critical View



July 2013



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Meet the Authors:

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Equity Spotlight

In this month's educate section, we draw attention to the idea that children are constantly engaged in the social and cultural process we call learning. Accordingly, we acknowledge all the individuals within our region who are committed to creating meaningful learning spaces for all children throughout the year. Students interact with a host of adults in learning spaces before, during, and after school and the school year. We salute families, teachers, administrators, summer camp counselors, religious leaders, police officers, and others who devote time and attention to supporting students by

IMPACT: Educate, Engage, Empower--For Equity

Learning is always rebellion...Every bit of new truth discovered is revolutionary to what was believed before.

--Margaret Lee Runbeck

Educate

"Learning is hard to understand if one thinks of it as a mental process occurring within the head of an isolated learner" (Sawyer, 2006, p. 9).

The final bell rings and students empty out their desks and lockers. In the United States, most K-12 students will not return to school for 10 weeks or more, and in many of those same schools and districts, a cry of concern rises up: How can we prevent summer learning loss? Based on a belief that students – particularly students from certain racial and class backgrounds – cease learning during the summer, many professionals and policymakers advocate for structured formal learning experiences in summer to stem the tide of "learning loss" (Smith, 2007). Similarly, researchers argue that summer learning loss widens the academic performance gap between white, middle class students and students coming from poor and minority backgrounds (Verachtert, Van Damme, Onghena, & Ghesquière, 2009; Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007). Summer learning loss, then, is often positioned as an equity issue, with disadvantaged students "losing" and

falling further behind due to the break. While many students and families could benefit from expanded opportunities during out-of-school time, it is important to challenge this notion of learning loss and its implications.

Troubling the Idea of “Learning Loss”

The notion of summer learning loss – also called “summer slide” or “summer brain drain” – has been part of educational discourse in the United States for several decades now. The supporting research typically uses spring and fall test score data to draw comparisons between students from different socio-economic backgrounds, showing that students from low-income families perform at the same level or lower on their fall assessments than they did on their spring assessments, while middle and upper income students perform slightly better on reading and mathematics tests between spring and fall (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2001). From here, researchers and policymakers draw a number of conclusions:

- “Children, it is reassuring to see, learn more and learn more efficiently when they are in school” (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2001, p. 177).
- Children with access to high-quality experiences keep exercising their minds and bodies at sleepaway camp, on family vacations, in museums and libraries and enrichment classes. Meanwhile, children without resources languish on street corners or in front of glowing screens. By the time the bell rings on a new school year, the poorer kids have fallen weeks, if not months, behind (Von Drehle, 2010, p. 36).
- “...disadvantaged children need year-round, supplemental programming to counter the continuing press of family and community conditions that hold them back” (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2007, p. 176).

The statements above bear critical reflection, lest they reinforce or contribute to problematic conclusions about the nature of learning, about particular families and communities, and about the steps policymakers, educators, and community members should take to address achievement disparities. Surfacing these assumptions may help us be better champions of equity for marginalized students.

First, within “summer slide” research, learning and performance on paper-and-pencil mathematics and English language exams are conflated. We should be cautious whenever a single metric is purported to stand for as broad a concept as learning. While low performance on measures of English literacy and mathematical ability - two vital skills in American society - should receive attention, the learning loss rhetoric denies the fact that deep, multifaceted learning takes place daily in and across contexts. Learning is not merely the act of filling vessels that may leak over two short months; it is a socio-cultural process that takes place in both informal and formal settings, with students constructing knowledge across and through many diverse experiences in their life course (Bransford et al, 2006; Freire, 2000; Rogoff, 2003; Sawyer, 2006). Intergenerational learning occurs when children engage with their adult family and community members (Moll, Amanti, & Neff, 1992). They also construct knowledge themselves as they engage with the world and with one another (Nasir, Rosebery, Warren, & Lee, 2006). For example, children are engaged in mathematical thinking while they play dominoes or keep score in basketball (Nasir & McKinney de Royston, 2013). They develop relational skills as they engage in play, and many experience high levels of challenge, motivation, and concentration during out-of-school activities (Larson, 2001). In short, students are always learning – in the context of their families and communities and in the classroom.

caring, expecting great things from them, and serving as active agents on their behalf. Most importantly, we recognize all of the uniquely gifted students in Region V and express our commitment to continuing our work to inform and enlighten education stakeholders about equity issues in schools. It is our mission to help ensure that the educational spaces in which students participate serve them well.

We have spotlighted a number of dedicated professionals during our tenure as an Equity Assistance Center. We would like to close Summer 2013 with a reminder of some of the individuals that have helped to inform our content to date.



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Alicia Lateer-Huhn



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Carole Craig



Sharon Radd



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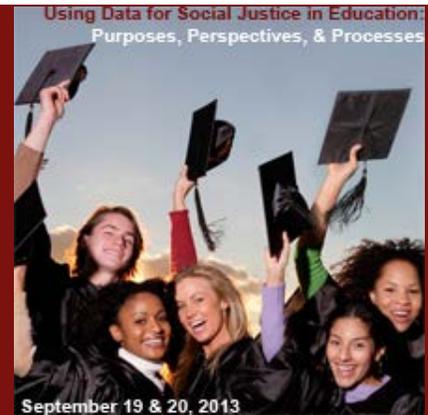


Jeff Diedrich

By failing to take these other forms of learning into account, summer learning loss rhetoric can lead to deficit assumptions about the home and community experiences that all students – but especially students of color and students from low socio-economic backgrounds - engage in while out of school. Because these experiences are neither valued nor centered in school contexts, educators lose opportunities to connect teaching and learning to students' own worlds and their "islands of expertise" (Delpit, 2006; see also, Artiles et al., 2011). Critical examination of the concept of learning loss, then, should lead to discussion about the ways in which educators can do a better job of assessing multiple forms of learning throughout the year and bridging the learning divide that occurs disproportionately for marginalized students between the school year and extended times off, such as summer. Once the conversation among educators, scholars, policymakers, and local community members shifts toward a model that combines learning in schools with learning through and within life experiences, we can begin to identify practicable strategies through which to accomplish the culturally responsive schooling that students and families deserve. We must consider simultaneously choices, options, and mandates that result in vastly divergent learning experiences as well as learning environments, practitioners, and outcomes; the very issues that continue to fuel the summer learning loss debate.

Deficit assumptions about home and community environments can also take the focus off inequities in schools, suggesting that family circumstances, not schools or education policies, are solely to blame for student outcomes. However, research is clear: high-poverty schools are riddled with inequalities, including less qualified staff, fewer resources, aging facilities, less rigorous curriculum, and more crowded classrooms (Gorski, 2007). Providing students in high-poverty schools with more time in these kinds of environments is unlikely to address performance gaps; in fact, research on time in school suggests that it will not increase student achievement on standardized tests (Cooper et al., 2003; Larson, 2001). As Larson (2001) suggests, "Human development is not a board game that can be won by having one's piece spend the most time on selected squares" (p. 163).

Finally, summer learning loss research is often used to advance policy agendas of mandatory summer school or year-round schooling as the means to fix "deficient" family and community experiences. While many families would welcome further schooling, childcare, or enrichment opportunities (in fact, one study showed that fifty-eight percent of parents reported that summer is the hardest time to make sure their kids are well cared for and engaged (Duffett, Johnson, Farkas, King, & Ott, 2004)), this can be accomplished without removing the locus of control for out-of-school experiences from families. So rather than determining for families what kinds of experiences they will be required to have, policymakers can and should collaborate with families to ensure that students, particularly those experiencing barriers to engagement, have programs and resources both in and out of school that meet their needs (Fairchild, McLaughlin, & Costigan, 2007). Educators and policymakers can also address common barriers, including registration fees and ancillary costs, family awareness of existing programs, adequate transportation and stereotypical beliefs about who can or should engage in particular kinds of programs in order to promote greater access (Pittman, Yohalem, & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2004). Finally, school staff can and should provide information and planning resources to families, collaborating with them as they select summer experiences (Sleeter, 2008) and promoting counter-stereotypical programs (e.g., encouraging girls to attend STEM summer programs or boys to participate in a dance class).



Apply Now for our Fall Equity Leaders Institute!

Upcoming Events

Illinois

July 20-24

[K-12 Conference for Extraordinary Educators](#)
Chicago, IL

July 30

[Seeing the Forest from the Trees: Using Professional Learning Communities to Simplify and Unite your School Improvement Process and Incorporate Student Growth](#)
[CEC 25th Annual Summer Institute](#)
Chicago, IL

Indiana

July 11-21

[Indiana Black Expo](#)
Indianapolis, IN

August 5

[Indiana Girls Collaborative Project Collaboration Forum](#)
Indianapolis, IN

Michigan

July 31

[House Education Subcommittee on Common Core Standards Meeting](#)
Lansing, MI

Minnesota

October 17-18

[2013 Education Minnesota Professional Conference](#)
St. Paul, MN

Our deepest-held vision for our students is that they are equipped and empowered to participate in a society that recognizes and values their unique abilities and contributions. While success in mathematics and literacy are undoubtedly an integral part of this vision, these are not the only forms of learning we should consider. In fact, by centering the learning experiences students have daily in their family and community contexts, we will be more likely to address gaps in performance. Finally, promoting greater opportunities for students, families, and communities to determine for themselves how time should be distributed across formal and informal learning experiences is important. As Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson (2001) themselves conclude, "Learning works best when children feel they are partners in the enterprise" (p. 184).

Have a question or comment about this article? [Share it here!](#)

Engage



"I can make a difference." This is the mantra at [Freedom School in Saint Paul, Minnesota](#), a K-8 summer program designed to empower students and families of color through culturally relevant reading curriculum, activities, field experiences, guest presentations, and parent seminars. The Freedom School in Minnesota is a partner of the Children's Defense Fund. Nationally, Freedom Schools serve nearly 12,000 children in over 80 cities throughout 25 states; in Saint Paul, Freedom School currently serves 350 children. The mission of this unique summer program is to impart the importance of civic engagement by putting students in touch with community members, activists, authors, and historical figures that look like them. Over the course of the six week program, students engage with content related to self, home, community, nation, and the world. Ultimately, it is the goal of Freedom School to teach students that "it takes teamwork to make a dream work."

One of the more unique aspects of Freedom School is its approach to family empowerment. Each Tuesday night, a parent or another significant figure in each student's life attends a seminar that provides essential advocacy skills and puts families in touch with community resources. One night, for example, family members participate in shared learning around how to engage teachers and advocate for their children during parent-teacher conferences. Tuesday seminars include a meal and activities for children to encourage full participation.

Now in its 16th summer, Dr. Hill, the director of Freedom School, has noticed some dramatic results. Freedom School participants have lower suspension rates and higher attendance and achievement than students who do not

Ohio

July 31

[Sharing Research- and Evidence-based Strategies to Increase the Participation of Under-represented Students in STEM Pathways: A Workshop for Participating STEM Equity Pipeline Project Team Members and Others Invested in Equity in STEM](#)

Columbus, OH

August 5-7

[Ohio Education Summer Academy](#)
Columbus, OH

Wisconsin

July 22-26

["Regular" Washburn Academy](#)
West Salem, WI

July 29- August 1

["Post" Washburn Academy](#)
West Salem, WI

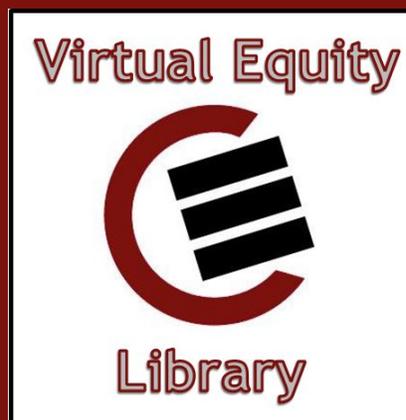
National

July 22-24

[American Federation of Teachers TEACH Conference](#)
Washington, D. C.

September 19-20

[Equity Works](#)
[CTE Equity Council](#)
Tulsa, OK



attend the program. They experience greater access to post-secondary education. In addition to coming back to teach in the program, former Freedom School participants have become elected officials and school teachers in Saint Paul – perhaps part of the reason the program enjoys strong support from [Saint Paul Public Schools](#) and [Saint Paul Area Council of Churches](#). As an Equity Assistance Center, we commend Dr. Hill and Freedom School for empowering students and families of color through culturally responsive formal and informal learning experiences.

Empower

Something to Read!



Johns Hopkins University researchers Alexander, Entwistle, & Olson analyzed 20 years of longitudinal test score data from a representative sample of elementary school children (n=790). They concluded that children from different socio-

economic backgrounds made similar progress during the school year and that the gaps in achievement between low-income students and their counterparts could be attributed to summer learning losses.

Since then, a number of educators have responded to this and other, similar studies. Some have cautioned against overreliance on standardized tests as measures of learning and have called for more comprehensive approaches to assessment. [Inge Dean](#) reflects that focusing entirely on tests that emphasize reading, writing, and arithmetic places an excessive burden on children, resulting in a devaluing of the important role of free, unstructured time for children to grow. In a similar vein, [Alfie Kohn](#) observes that standardized test scores, rather than other, less biased artifacts of learning, often serve as the basis for summer learning loss claims and that performance losses in reading could be easily countered by promoting greater access to self-selected books. He concludes that summer loss is more of an indictment of traditional education's problematic reliance on surface-level learning through lectures, textbooks, worksheets, grades, tests, and homework.

Something to Watch!

[Ho'Omoana Hawaiian Cultural Summer Camp](#) is a cultural heritage summer program that is intended to cultivate the Hawaiian language arts in the Pacific Northwest. The program includes



dancing, music, and language, and is an introduction to the

Hawaiian culture. The program targets not only children with a Hawaiian cultural heritage, but any child who would like to learn about the culture. This summer would be a good time for you to familiarize yourself with the cultural heritage programs that may available in your school district.

Something to Use!

Many families opt to have their children stay at home or with relatives during the summer. A number of websites have excellent suggestions for summer activities. These range from academic exercises that incorporate development of math and reading skills to home-based learning. The [School and Family Website](#) suggests engaging children in activities that develop math skills by allowing children to plan picnics, estimate time and distance, play grocery games, or clip coupons. It also offers language arts activities that encourage children to search for words, engage in home theater, develop picture books, read and re-write histories, and even volunteer as readers for the elderly in the community. Other [interesting ideas](#) include gardening, visiting parks, camping, volunteering, attending discounted movies, engaging in arts and crafts projects. Outdoor fun, including tree climbing and jump-rope, as well as projects such as planting vegetables, writing a book or journal, making a movie with a camcorder, collecting bugs and rocks, planning outings, and doing chores, are all summer activities recommended by [The Learning Community](#).

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