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EXPERT COMMENT: Learning loss and implications for Covid-19 and school closures

The ongoing situation and school closures as result of Covid-19 have a number of different implications for the education sector. Dr Emily Mann and Dr Jackie Shinwell of Northumbria University's [Healthy Living Lab](#) explored the impact of the coronavirus crisis in terms of learning loss in this blog for Schools North East.

Since the World Health Organisation declared the Covid-19 outbreak as a global pandemic on 11 March 2020, the UK government announced school closures for all children, with the exception of vulnerable children and children of key workers, from 20 March 2020 and introduced social distancing measures on 23 March 2020, to reduce the spread of the virus. Most children have now been at home for seven weeks, approximately the same length of time of the school summer holidays. The UK government has recently announced that schools may extend their opening to nursery, reception, Year 1 and Year 6 pupils in England from June 1st.

We acknowledge that the safeguarding of children and the health of children, teachers and all school staff are paramount, however we will not debate the public health considerations regarding the proposed reopening of schools. Instead, we will reflect on the impact of school closures, particularly for disadvantaged children, and, drawing on our research on holiday provision and summer learning loss, will consider the potential implications for research informed short-, mid- and long-term strategies to address this issue.

Research has shown that children from low socioeconomic status start their academic career behind their more affluent peers and children who live in persistent poverty in the UK do less well than children from more affluent families. By the time UK children leave school, at the age of 16, children from

low-income families are nearly two years behind their peers from higher income families. Contributing factors for this gap in attainment include low-level education of low-income families, lack of parental involvement and engagement in children's school progress, lower parental expectations of achievement as well as material factors such as access to resources (laptops, computers, books) and enriching opportunities.

The most recent detailed estimates of child poverty (after housing costs) in the North East, published by the End Child Poverty coalition, indicate that in 2017/18 35.3% of children in the North East live in poverty, equivalent to over 200,000 children. Furthermore, it is evident that children from low-income families in the North East perform worse than disadvantaged children from other regions of England: by the age 16, a lower proportion (30%) of disadvantaged pupils in the North East achieve the equivalent of 5 A*-C GCSEs compared to the England average (34%) for disadvantaged children, and there has been very little narrowing of this gap. Thus, whilst school closures will affect the learning of all children, they will disproportionately impact those children from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

We know from our research on school holiday provision that families face challenges during the school holidays and these are more acutely experienced by low-income families; a typical school summer holiday for children from low-income families may mean six to seven weeks of hunger, inactivity, boredom and social isolation until school resumes. To address the challenges of the school holidays for low-income families, hundreds of holiday clubs have been established across the UK, albeit in a piecemeal and fragmented manner, to provide support to families by reducing social isolation, financial hardship, and providing a safe place for children to play and access enrichment activities.

In addition, it is speculated that children attending school holiday clubs continue to learn and it has been suggested that this may help reduce the gap in attainment between children from different socio-economic backgrounds and potentially reduce learning loss. It should be noted that these school holiday clubs differ significantly to summer teaching schools that provide formal academic lessons. Rather school holiday clubs offer parents support with childcare, and children a range of activities (e.g. day trips, arts and crafts, sports etc.) to participate in. Thus learning and socialisation occurs in a far more informal manner.

Learning loss has been defined as the tendency for children to lose skills and knowledge across the summer holidays, particularly in maths and reading. Whilst there are a number of studies from North America and Europe examining this phenomenon, there are only two studies on the UK population (Shinwell & Defeyter, 2017, 2020), and the authors concluded that at best, children's learning stagnates over the summer. Shinwell & Defeyter found that children who lived in and attended schools in areas of high deprivation lost skills and knowledge in spelling, but after seven weeks of teaching, performance improved and exceeded levels achieved at the end of the previous term; although no significant changes occurred with regard to children's performance in reading. Moreover, after a six-week summer break, children's learning in maths computation stagnated.

Clearly, it is not just children in the UK who have not been able to attend school since the Covid-19 pandemic, and using data from studies of summer learning loss, researchers have predicted that at best children's learning will stall, and estimated that by the time children return to school in September, their learning and level of skills, at best, will be at the same level when schools closed in March. Worst case scenario suggests that children may lose up to a whole term's worth of knowledge – returning to school with the level of skills and knowledge they had achieved by December 2019.

Teachers and school staff have made vast efforts to bridge the gap between school and home and provide learning material to pupils via a range of mediums. Nevertheless, schools had to respond to the UK government's announcement of the closure of school buildings and implement programmes of distant learning within a short period of time and thus the quality of these programmes will vary between institutions. Additional resources have also been made available through BBC bitesize and 180 video lessons have been produced by the National Oak Academy across a wide range of subjects for each year group. However, on-line learning will be a very different experience and cannot replace what happens in classrooms where children are able to interact with their teachers and peers.

Whether children's learning at best stagnates, or worst case scenario declines by up to a whole term's worth of knowledge, it is important that the government provides advice, guidance and support to schools to help make up for the shortfall in children's learning. This could include providing advice, guidance on teaching strategies including where in the curriculum teaching should resume and how to test for learning loss to ensure that those children in society who are already at a disadvantage, are able to flourish and not fall

even further behind. Evidence from the US demonstrates that schools have the potential to serve as an equalizer, enabling children from all backgrounds to learn at the same rate and prevent the educational gap between disadvantaged children and their more affluent peers from widening further.

There is no doubt that whenever schools re-open, teachers and school staff face numerous challenges relating to social distancing, number of children whom can attend, increased need for psychological support etc. To ease these challenges, schools should be provided with major funding and support from central government.

Given that the Education Endowment Fund suggests a significant increase in the educational attainment gap careful modelling is required in order to generate effective interventions to narrow this gap. Recently there have been a number of suggested interventions, from additional half hour catch up sessions, extended schools, to increased holiday provision. While all are well intentioned, we suggest that the government should increase funding to ALL schools and allow head teachers to employ this funding though the most appropriate method in their own school. To address inequality in educational attainment, an increase in pupil premium would be quick to initiate and would not require the setting up of new funding systems.

Northumbria University's [Healthy Living Lab](#) undertakes research to inform and advise policy makers, academics, businesses and local councils on health-related issues. Researchers have led on research into the positive impacts of school and community breakfast clubs; holiday hunger; nutrition in schools and workplaces and the associations between nutrition, cognition and physical activity.

This blog was [first published by Schools North East](#).

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