



Vol 63 No 3
June 2020

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Mind the gap

Usually, the term “learning gap” refers to the difference between what students have learnt and what they should have learnt. However, *Stay at home* for school students and their parents has raised the issue of whether students experiencing a gap in school attendance are disadvantaged. Like most important issues, the answer is complex, not simple, and varies for every student. As Christian teachers, we want the best for each of our students, so this matter is of interest and how we react is crucial to our witness about God’s love in a changing world.

The default position

On the surface, it is easy to argue that students will be disadvantaged by not having face to face lessons in a classroom environment, otherwise why would we build classrooms, employ teachers and allocate resources to schools. And this view is supported by the growing community realisation that online learning is not a universal solution. Besides, there are other social benefits from learning with others in a school environment.

The gap

Realising that, during the coronavirus epidemic, students will not be at school, education authorities rushed to develop and to use existing online learning activities and to use internet communication via Zoom and other apps to communicate directly with students. While this engagement kept teachers fully occupied, some parents struggled to supervise and assist with home lessons. These initiatives aimed to avoid the expected gap in learning from students not completing their school year/grade curriculum requirements in a range of subjects for their age cohort.

Research findings

But how real is the gap and is there any research evidence? Perhaps the closest research is from the United States where students can have a break of up to 10 weeks for summer. In a study *Summer learning loss: What is it, and what can we do about it?* Quinn and Polikoff (2017) review the literature and concluded that: (1) on average, students' achievement scores declined over summer vacation by one month's worth of school-year learning, (2) declines were sharper for math than for reading, and (3) the extent of loss was larger at higher grade levels.

One study using data from over half a million students in grades 2-9 from a southern state (from 2008-2012) found that students, on average, lost between 25 - 30 percent of their school-year learning over the summer. However, an analysis of the nationally-representative Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 2010 - 11 (ECLS-K:2011) found little evidence of overall loss over the summers after grades K and 1.

Also, relevant to the current Australian experience is that this report also looked at vacation programs aimed to help all students but particularly students from disadvantaged backgrounds. They found that advantaged students got most from these programs because the level of parental support was higher. This may relate to the current online learning at home where students with higher educated parents and resources, both technological and personal, achieve greater learning. Closing the gap between students with different backgrounds is not an outcome and those disadvantaged can fall further behind in their cohort.

Some parents have found the experience of having their children learn at home a good one and are now considering home schooling. Although they understand the burden of home schooling, they see that their children can progress at their own rate and feel more confident. However, as students reach higher grades, parent expertise across the curriculum diminishes and tutoring is often called for. Some of these parents are calling for a hybrid model with home schooling and classroom learning being used.

In home schooling the lack of social contact with others can be compensated for by activities including participating in sporting teams. However, it is harder to compensate the loss of opportunity to develop leadership skills, to work in groups and hear different perspectives.

But students involved in distance learning in isolated situations rely heavily on parents whether part of home schooling or distance education with regular contact with an allocated teacher. As with online learning, independent learners do best in these situations.

Unlike the USA vacation, the coronavirus gap has not entirely been a holiday as students have been expected to complete online work and to communicate regularly with their teachers. If from the research the average loss is one month's learning for 10 weeks of vacation, then it should be something less than this during the at home period for the coronavirus. But the loss and gains will not be even across all students.

The gap varies with every student

Some of the issues that affect the success of closing the gap between learning at school and learning at home are (in no particular order of importance):

1. One size fits all

The curriculum is set in age/year grades and students' progress through these grades receiving reports on progress. Students who are unsuccessful are not encouraged to repeat for mainly social reasons and therefore moved with their cohort into the next grade. This can mean that some students are always behind,

although others, with increasing maturity, catch up. Students who are having difficulty keeping up with their peers may find that they have fallen further behind from online learning unless they have been subject to close supervision from their teacher and parents at home. For some students the gap between what they know and can do and what is expected of their cohort may have widened.

2. Progression through the curriculum (time verses outcomes)
There is a common argument that given time all students can achieve their grade learning outcomes in all subjects. In this regard, online learning that has focussed on revision and consolidation may assist students who have been stragglers. However, the students who have been doing well may find the online learning repetitive and able to be completed by morning tea. In these cases, the learning gap may be narrowed but other students are not challenged by new work and easily bored.
3. On task learning
A teacher working from school with students in their homes has the added problem of keeping students on task. Even in the daily school environment students may seem to be working but on further investigation found to be doing other tasks or simply unmotivated. In this regard parents have borne a heavy burden of keeping their children on task. Time is not the only matter. Whether the students are actually doing anything, or doing it to their best ability, is an issue that may vary with every student. The learning gap between face to face classroom learning and online learning may vary with how on task the student is.
4. Learning new concepts
While revision and consolidation can be the focus of online learning, the learning of new concepts poses another set of problems for teachers and parents at home assisting their children. New concepts need careful explanations and examples and each student learns at a different rate. Some get it the first time, but others struggle for weeks if not years. Moving whole cohorts of students into new concepts is particularly difficult online. Some online programs do it well, but, for most students, this is where teachers earn their pay.
5. Access to resources (including parents)
Inequality is another factor in explaining this gap between learning at school and online learning. A significant inequality is the education level of parents or grandparents who have the task of supervising the children at home. It is not simply a question of what the parent might know, but the issues of on task learning. Even the most dedicated parents may find that the way students are taught some concepts or methods, especially in mathematics, are very different to how they learn the same concepts and methods. They quickly realise that teaching their children by their method could make learning more difficult when the teacher does it differently.
6. Independent learning
For whatever reasons some students have learnt to be independent learners who like to have tasks set that they can work away at by themselves. They are motivated and disciplined. These students have a clear advantage in online learning over other students.
7. Teacher quality
Research indicates that the biggest explanation for differences in student outcomes between classes is the teacher. In the current analysis students who have teachers that can adapt well to online learning will have an advantage. This is the reality of education. Some teachers are better than others at their work and

students can thrive with one teachers and lag behind with another. Maintaining teacher quality through appropriate training programs is always a priority and many teachers have been on a steep learning curve about online learning.

8. Disadvantage and learning

Students from disadvantaged backgrounds often lag behind other students including in online learning. Recent work by The Centre for Independent Studies and a Report by the Smith Family Australia highlight the educational disadvantages including the lack of equipment/technology which means that other students are privileged by being resource rich in comparison. Despite the disadvantages, schools and teachers with students from disadvantaged backgrounds need to have high expectations of these students and provide new ways for them to access the curriculum to achieve. Often the focus in schools has been on the disadvantages and not on the learning leading to some teachers believing that students from disadvantage backgrounds cannot learn like other students. Yes, it's a struggle, but these students are not less intelligent and need to be taught well so that they can overcome disadvantage. The online learning and classroom gap for these students cannot be overcome by ignoring this fundamental issue and the better provision of technology.

Conclusion

Depending on the students, their teacher and the home resources, students are disadvantaged in different ways by online learning compared to face to face classroom learning. Some students who are struggling at school will continue to struggle at home, but through extra revision and consolidation may pick up on other students in their class, although not if new work and concepts are introduced. For the bright independent learning students, online learning can be easy and a bit boring, so they desire something new and challenging. Both long to meet friends and play sport and games. School is not only about academic learning.

Expectations are very powerful in determining educational outcomes. If teachers expect a gap then one can develop, but if they expect high achievement then students are more likely to reach that achievement. It is particularly important that Christian teachers maintain high expectations so that students have every opportunity to know God through their studies and relationships.

If the research is showing that on average one month of learning is lost through an extended period away from school, then the online learning should have helped to close this gap and ready students for the return to school. How big this gap is will be different for every child according to the variations listed above. One thing is certain, dedicated teachers can quickly close any gap and have students back on track. They and their students, especially HSC students, will be highly motivated and this, of itself, will be a key factor in success.

In Christchurch, New Zealand 2011, after the earthquake, students missed a term of school. The learning report from the Education Review Office indicates *students across greater Christchurch achieved some of the best National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) results in New Zealand in 2011, with some schools reporting an increase of up to 15%.*

John Gore

Jesus, God and what now: Why apathy toward faith is a challenge in school ministry

by Meghann McCloud, Scripture Union NSW Sydney Metro Ministry Worker.

The challenges we face often define or re-define our attitudes to some of life's largest questions. It is apathy that can sometimes be the incentive to avoiding a deeper engagement with these questions.

For Scripture Union NSW and the 200+ SUPA (Years 5 and 6) and ISCF (High School) groups we support, we are certainly being challenged on the frontline with apathetic attitudes to faith. Even before the disruption of COVID-19, SUNSW has always sought to bring the Good News of Jesus to children, young people and families, through all seasons. Our school ministry activities through SU have played a major role in providing opportunities for public school students to discover God, ask the questions they have about Jesus and learn how to read his word in their discipleship. This is the space God has asked SU to step into and it's thanks to God that the discipleship of young people in New South Wales continues in public schools through SUPA and ISCF.

Working in school ministry is not without its challenges. One of the challenges we face is a rapidly changing culture in faith attitudes. A reflection of this is seen in young people's apathetic approach towards belief in something larger than themselves. This apathy is often expressed toward faith of any expression, but in our Christian context, some young people often have close to no association with a person who is a Christ follower, let alone knowing anything about Bible stories. Secondary references or influences are often the culprit to informing young people's opinion of Jesus, the Bible or church culture. It can be either negative or caricatured impressions of Christianity that stoke these indifferent attitudes. However, to offset these attitudes, SUNSW SUPA and ISCF Directors can fill that space in the Christian lunchtime groups they run in a school context. Simply because these Christian leaders are there physically in a school counts for a lot in two ways; they are a primary and authentic witness to Jesus' name, and they make themselves available to young people in ways accessible to them when faith issues arise at school.

We have stories from our SUPA and ISCF Directors who testify about the young people who come to their SUPA or ISCF. These young people may have never met Christians before or heard stories from the Bible. Nonetheless, they turn up and initially will watch and observe what takes place for a long time. But they return again and again to the group either with more intrigue or pluck up enough courage to have a go at getting more involved. An indicator of this is usually an increase in questions or statements. This is a sign, as well, that these young people are testing and challenging what they believe about God or faith, but they've been encouraged in their SUPA or ISCF group to do that. It's in these moments that the rubber hits the road between SUPA/ISCF leaders and attendees. Young people are increasingly searching and yearning for what is not only true but also authentically good and consistent. SUPA and ISCF Directors are available and ready for when these young people come to them in these moments. The regularity of their attendance is a huge help for this to occur.

SU ministry workers, like myself, endeavour to support SUPA and ISCF Directors that go into schools to know Jesus afresh, aligning themselves in Kingdom values, so that they authentically respond to children's questions about following Jesus. Making this a regular and consistent activity, we believe, is having this positive engagement effect on those young people who go to SUPA or ISCF. These leaders are meeting the challenge of apathy to faith with an expectant attitude of what God may do as they share his word and pray to him. And young people are observing this witness, coming back for more encouragement and some coming to believe in Jesus. Leaders are praying to God to move and we are

seeing Him draw young people to Him through SUPA and ISCF. It's even amidst a challenge like apathy toward Christianity that gives opportunities for SUPA and ISCF leaders to represent God authentically. They then embolden young people to wrestle in their heart and mind about the Gospel and that is a real strength to school ministry.

For SU, our dependence on God through prayer to guide us through a challenge like this has been the essential ingredient in responding. God can sharpen and create a new understanding of what is important, how he's made us and what he wants to do in the world at a place and time. We have asked him to further shape the things he wants for SU so we are equipped to respond appropriately in ministry. SU has had to be creative, as always, about how we're going to be in places and spaces sharing the Good News of Jesus. We put confidence in Jesus that he is doing a deeper work in us to meet these challenges not only in school ministry but come what may in the future. These challenges aren't about getting answers to why they happen or how to merely survive through them. Instead, can we recognise and align ourselves with Jesus through it all to overcome them and see the Kingdom breakthrough? We always need support in ministry, whether that's through prayer or financial assistance, but our biggest strength and the One on whom we depend on for all things is ultimately God. He will keep us strong.

You can follow what SUNSW is up to in ministry through our website, www.sunsw.org.au. If you'd like to know about a recent impact story on ISCF you can hear about Katie's story, go to <https://youtu.be/On5TMGin6Z4>.

Prayer Points

- Pray for school staff, parents and students as they adjust to the alternate learning arrangements.
- Pray that Year 12 students won't be anxious about their final results.
- Pray for families that have been directly affected by COVID-19.
- Pray for wisdom for chaplains and other Christian school staff as they seek to support those they work with.
- Pray that our leaders will have wisdom in making decisions about the necessary ongoing changes.
- Give thanks for the ministry of SUPA and ISCF groups in public schools.
- Pray that God will continue to lead and guide Scripture Union staff in the years ahead.

TCF Getaway - All welcome - Register by 1st July

Thursday 16th - Saturday 18th July 2020

At this stage we are hoping the Get Away will go ahead at The Retreat Cottage, 51 Bendena Gardens, Stanwell Tops.

All inclusive cost is \$135. Day visitors: \$15. No payment required prior to the weekend but you MUST register by email tcfofnsw@exemail.com.au.

For more details: 0490 148 249. Look forward to seeing you there.

**Agenda for TCF Annual General Meeting
on Saturday 20th June 2020 at 1.30pm
via Zoom.**

**Registrations of intention to be present MUST be made to the office
by 11th June 2020.**

Once registered, reports and the link for the meeting will be sent to you.

For those not attending reports will be published in the next TCFNews.

AGENDA

1. Welcome
2. Apologies
3. Proxies
4. Minutes of Annual General Meeting held 15th May 2019 to be accepted.
5. Matters arising:
6. Reports from Committee:
 - President
 - Secretary
 - Treasurer
7. Appointment of Auditor.
8. Appointment of Public Officer.
9. Election of Committee - President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer
Committee members.
10. General Business.
11. Closing Prayer.

Proxy forms and Committee nomination forms are available,
on request, from the office.

What members have been doing lately

Here are the replies to the Easter email.

Margaret - It's exactly what I needed, loads of time at home to get a myriad of things done. To be positive about it, there's actually so many good Christian things coming through emails and with friends through Zoom. I'm also reading '1,000 Gifts' by Ann Voskamp which I highly recommend. Apart from that, there's a lot of suffering in the world to be prayerful about.

Nev - We have had to give up pastoral care and the church service we run at our local nursing home which, from its opening, asked our church to provide spiritual input for residents.

Pam B. - We are managing as well as we can. Fortunately we have quite a large garden which fills up a lot of our time. Also phone calls to family and friends is another way we keep in touch, plus emails to those who live interstate. It is certainly made a change to our way of life but fortunately we remain healthy and occupied.

Lynda - We're busy working to take up the Department's invitation to put SRE on remote learning.

Want something new to do?

Have a look at TCF Facebook and post an idea or comment.

<p>Disclaimer: The views expressed in articles and letters published in <i>TCF News</i> are not necessarily those of TCFNSW.</p>

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