

Where Is Manuel? A Rejection of 'Learning Loss'

When retired educator, Mrs. B., began helping out the teachers in the pandemic, she was determined to give it her all. In person, she assisted in a classroom that contained elementary students that were taught in-person and remotely. Both she and other educators dug deep in their pedagogical toolkits and scored some real wins - students who were engaged in, happy, and learning mathematics. They made connections, took pride in their work, and were eager to explain their ideas.

Mrs. B. noticed an absent student when she first began volunteering. As the days progressed, she kept waiting for the student to appear. When there continued to be no mention of him, she finally asked:

Where is Manuel?

The response? "Oh, he never comes." These same educators, so seemingly dedicated to their charges, may well have summarily dismissed Manuel as a **lost** cause, effectively erasing him from class: his needs ignored.

Clearing the Air

It is important to note that we believe that learning takes place *everywhere* and *always*. However, let us first delve into the idea of learning loss in schools. **Learning loss**. What a farce. We continue to deem only some children as worthy enough to educate, only some worthy enough to spend that additional energy. This is not new. **Learning loss** has been government-sanctioned for centuries. Entire segments of society have been excluded from learning while they were enslaved, colonized, or marginalized on this country's soil. No funding for adequate schools were established in which they would be educated, and few, if any, competent educators were supplied to attend to their needs.

For example, Indigenous children were stolen from their families and forced into residential schools in North America. The education they received stripped them of their language and culture, not to mention the mental and physical abuse they endured. When we speak of **learning loss**, do we think of the learning that these children were deprived of or do we acknowledge that there were actual lives lost? Do we dare calculate the learning that was **lost** to generations of Black people during American slavery and after emancipation, similarly deprived of language and culture? Throughout the South, the promise of Reconstruction in the late 1800s was never fulfilled.

School segregation also gave way to **learning loss**. Akin to Jim Crow, laws in California against Mexicans made unequal access to books, transportation, and school buildings the norm. Sylvia Mendez and her family successfully fought against it in Mendez v. Westminster in 1947. The Mendez case preceded the famous Brown v. Board of Education case that followed in 1954. Nine Black students enrolled at Central High School in 1957, but neither a Supreme Court ruling nor the National Guard could protect these students from violence. To block further desegregation, Governor Orval Faubus closed the city's high schools the following school year. Schools closed. Education paused. Learning was indeed **lost**.

To be clear, the government has engaged in the deprivation of learning - for some students - for centuries. This is in stark contrast to what happened these last eighteen months of pandemic instruction. Although school buildings closed, education continued, albeit not unilaterally, as displayed in the vignette above. Part of the difficulty in writing this piece lies in the hesitation to legitimize this idea of **loss** of learning. Many students were fortunate enough to have educators who were unleashed to pursue a more equitable and effective pedagogy. For these fortunate students and educators, there was a net gain, not a **loss**. Other educators did not enjoy that newfound freedom. Still others maintained their usual practices that continued to result in underperformance of their marginalized students.

To buy into this as a debate is a trap - there are no "both sides" here. We at TODOS: Mathematics for ALL, believe that education should, in fact, be for all. Tracking and its uneven results would not exist. Neither would mandatory remediation due to this **loss**. What is offered below is a reframing of the discussion. We choose to center learning, specifically mathematics learning, as happening in many spaces, including classrooms. It is creative, joyous, and a source of liberation.

The Case Has Already Been Made

In <u>The Mo(ve)ment to Prioritize Antiracist Mathematics: Planning for This and Every School Year</u>, we reinforced our vision to prioritize antiracist mathematics education for all students. We highlighted the four essential actions from our joint position statement with NCSM; to eliminate deficit views, eradicate mathematics as a gatekeeper, engage in the sociopolitical turn in mathematics education and to elevate the professional development of mathematics educators. We laid out actions, in each of our commentaries, that highlight ways we can move toward antiracist mathematics education for all students.

Funding and attention to "fix learning loss" disregards our essential and suggested actions. To point out the many ways in which this claim further creates unjust and inequitable mathematics opportunities would be restating the majority of the positions and beliefs of our prior statements. Instead of repeating the evidence we've shared about how the current system is broken and unjust for marginalized populations in the mathematics classroom, we invite you to imagine the future and the impact this label and these actions will have.

Consider what experiences might lie ahead for Manuel. Manuel missed a large amount of academic time, according to his classroom teacher, last year. It's the first day of school, and Manuel is sitting in a classroom for the first time since the announcement of a global pandemic.

What might be going through Manuel's head? What might Manuel be thinking or feeling right now? Manuel missed out on some of the experiences that his peers were a part of last year. He has to navigate how to connect with his classmates and how to connect to new mathematics content when he knows his experience was different from so many others.

What might be going through Manuel's head? What might Manuel be thinking or feeling because of this?

During the school day, Manuel works in a small group, with a different teacher, on mathematics content from the math they learned last year, and years before.

What might be going through Manuel's head? What might Manuel be thinking or feeling because of this?

A Deficit Assumption

In reality, tracking and labeling has probably already put Manuel in similar situations during his schooling, and he has had to navigate similar ideas about himself and feelings about school in the past. Manuel, and many students like him, have been here before. They have been told, directly and indirectly, that they are on track to fail or that something is already wrong with them. The message they continue to receive is that their impending failure must be prevented, or they themselves must be fixed. This implicit message goes beyond deficit thinking toward students and is now exposing the deficit thinking toward families and communities.

This farce embodies the assumption that learning didn't happen, or that it didn't happen enough. This assumption is an insult to educators and families alike. Most teachers did everything they could to support their students academically. It is possible that the teacher in the vignette above spent hours trying to connect with Manuel, with little to no luck. When teachers could not connect, students continued their learning and growing with and within their families and communities. Some of this learning was closely matched to traditional school standards, and some of this learning was not as aligned to school standards but went deeper and was more authentic than anything that could have been learned through a computer screen or even in a school building. This learning may be different, but it is not any less important and should not be treated as if it is wrong or insufficient.

Let's revisit Manuel. With persistence, the educators would have discovered that Manuel's days away from class were rich with learning experiences. Instead of attending class remotely, he went with his father to work and helped with his younger siblings and animals on the family farm. Early in the mornings, hours before remote class began, he would rise to collect eggs and feed the chickens, calculating the number of egg cartons he would need to grab in order to hold them all. After the chickens, he went to feed the three goats, carefully measuring out a scoop of feed for each of them. He often studied the feed chest, estimating how many days he had left before they needed to get more feed. After feeding the goats, he fed the birds and the dog, and was usually done just in time to get his younger brother and sister up, dressed and ready for the day.

At the time Manuel's first remote lesson was taking place, his family was piled in their minivan, headed to where their dad was working for the week. Some days Manuel and his siblings had enough signal from the hotspot on their father's phone that they could download their school work, and when they did, Manuel spent most of the time helping his siblings complete their assignments. Eventually all three of them gave up on the

virtual worksheets to observe their father measure, cut and create with the materials he was working with. They waited for the chance to help and jumped at the opportunity whenever he asked. Manuel and his siblings did some work assigned by their teachers, but they were more motivated and engaged in the learning that was acquired outside of school. Manuel has not **lost** learning. The flexibility of remote learning has allowed him to supplement his studies from school with a rich mathematical understanding of the world.

The educators in Manuel's class left him to fend for himself, much like the government left newly freed citizens to create their own educational system. Both Manuel's family and Black people in the Reconstruction period were failed by their public systems, yet they made sure meaningful learning happened for their children. What would they have been able to accomplish if the government had actually lived up to its promise to educate them fully? The calculation of this **loss** seems more material.

School Is Starting Again - What Next?

Resist. Resist the thinking that students like Manuel are behind, and instead remind yourself that they are right where they should be after a pandemic. Resist deficit thinking and do not send deficit messages to the students like Manuel, and others who did attend daily, and instead look for what knowledge they gained and how they grew. Resist assuming families like Manuel's don't care about school because they didn't show up to class, and instead assume they care so much that they had them engaged in learning in other ways. Resist making the assumption that the learning students like Manuel experienced was not enough, and instead assume their experiences contributed to their present and future success in ways that are just as good, if not better, than what could have been learned through school. Resist the temptation to sit students like Manuel in front of a computer program to be fixed, and instead sit something in front of them that engages their interest and sparks their curiosity. Resist removing students like Manuel from the classroom to get "caught up" on what they missed; and assume they hold unique knowledge that they could share as an asset. Resist teaching mathematics to students with the mission to do well on a test, and instead teach students mathematics with the mission to do well on a test, and instead teach students mathematics with the mission to do well on a test, and instead teach students mathematics with the mission to do well on a test, and instead teach students mathematics with the mission to do well on a test, and instead teach students mathematics with the mission to do well on a test, and instead teach students mathematics with the mission to do well on a test, and instead teach students mathematics with the mission to do well on a test.

As educators, we keep our eye on the arriving, not on those already there. It is our job to identify the sparks of brilliance and guide the potential we see. We seek to enable students to identify the deep thinking, wondering, and imagining that they already do mathematically. We want them to embrace their mathematical beings.

"Joy is an act of resistance." ~ Toi Dericotte

Many students, families, and educators are experiencing mathematics in joyous ways. We referred earlier to educators who were unleashed to employ this type of pedagogy. There is much to be learned here: seeking joy and the mathematics that comes out of that joy. We offer a few examples below.

It is never too late to start them early, as seen <u>here</u> as this newborn (courtesy May Vang) grapples with the wonders of different types of rectangles.

In the midst of the pandemic, Jenise Sexton created an outdoor mathematics after school camp for middle school students to play with mathematics joyfully, as seen below.



How about beginning each mathematics class with this <u>song</u> from the Resistance Revival Choir to set the tone for the learning? In the 1943 film, *Stormy Weather*, this <u>famous dance scene</u> displays the musical talents of Cab Calloway and the Nicholas Brothers that was done in a single take. Students may be interested to analyze the mathematics of the dance steps during this period - the obvious joy displayed during this period of racial strife. How about a little <u>salsa</u> from Cuba to analyze rhythm, cadence, and time signatures? This is what we mean when we center joy. This is what we can expose our students to - centering joy as they resist and fight for a better educational experience.

We Make A Fist

By Mahogany L. Browne from Woke: A Young Poet's Call to Justice

The girl up the block is good at coloring in the lines

The kid next door is great at popping wheelies

My cousin across the street is a magician when it comes to making songs

And my brother is good at baking cookies

When we want to have a picnic We bring our greatest talents Put them all on the blanket And share with each other The laughter and songs The artwork and baked goods Created by our hands.

Similarly, our students all bring brilliance to us in many forms. Let students create the mathematics they need with their hands.

www.todos-math.org