

EDUFOCUS NUMBER 7

SUMMER TIME..DO CHILDREN LOSE MORE THAN THEY GAIN?

July brings laughter and anticipation for many children. The summer holiday means no school and more time for fun, sleep and lazy, unstructured days. But, does it have to mean that they fall behind in their education too? The two months of summer break are eagerly anticipated by most children, but research in the USA suggests that by the time they return to school in September our children may have taken a couple of steps backwards, forgetting some of what they learned during the previous academic year.

Unfortunately, we have no evidence for Jamaica as we have not yet begun to assess the full impact of two months outside of the classroom, and, for many, with no engagement in anything academically constructive. Although summer school is an entrenched part of the urban educational landscape, we have no data on what percentage of our children attend summer classes and what is the real impact of their participation.

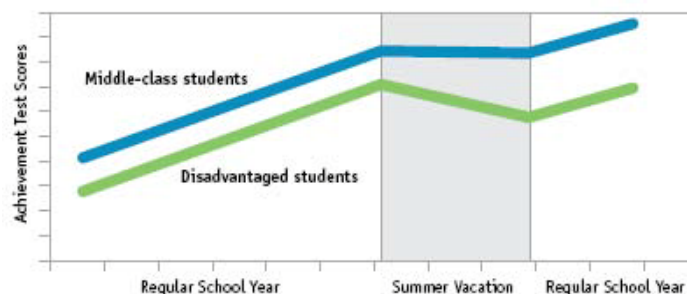


WHAT DO WE KNOW?

Duke University Professor Harris Cooper, considered an authority in the area of 'summer loss', integrated 39 studies examining the effects of summer vacation on standardized achievement test scores in the USA. His analysis showed that children lose as much as one month of instruction as "measured by grade level equivalents on standardized test scores" – their average test results are at least one month lower when they return to school after the holidays than when they left at the beginning of summer (Cooper 2003).

This loss was far more pronounced for children from lower socio-economic backgrounds than for their counterparts from wealthier homes. While wealthier children often have stimulating options for at least a portion of the summer vacation, poor children are frequently left unsupervised for the long summer holiday and are the main victims of the summer learning loss. This finding is supported by research at Johns Hopkins University, which found that learning loss is cumulative throughout the primary stage. By ninth grade, two-thirds of the achievement gap in the USA can be attributed to summer learning loss.

General Pattern of Reading Achievement for Students From Different Income Groups



Cooper et al, conducted a meta-analysis, which is a review and synthesis of multiple research studies. They reviewed 93 evaluations of summer school programs serving grades K through 12, and also reviewed qualitative data from the program evaluations, including interviews with teachers, parents, and administrators.

Note: The above is a generalized representation from all studies reviewed.

Source: National Summer Learning Association cited by Curry (2011)

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The Johns Hopkins team also found, incredibly, that teachers sometimes spend the first four to six weeks of the new school year re-teaching topics which they covered the previous school year, because the students simply forget the material over the holiday (Curry 2011).

The evidence is so overwhelming that school districts across the USA are eager to implement summer learning programmes that engage children and keep them performing at their pre-holiday levels. In fact, the US Secretary of Education has been speaking openly about the implications of this data for education policy initiatives; should they extend the school year or support more summer interventions?

WHAT WORKS?

Results revealed that summer programs focusing on remedial, accelerated, or enriched learning had

Very importantly, Cooper found that ‘summer loss’ was more pronounced for math, facts, and spelling than for other tested skill areas:

“Substantial economic differences were also found for reading. On some measures, middle-class children showed gains in reading achievement over the summer, but disadvantaged children showed losses. Reading comprehension scores for both income groups declined, but the scores of disadvantaged students declined more.”

a positive impact on the knowledge and skills of participants. Although all students benefited from summer school, students from middle-class homes showed larger positive effects than students from disadvantaged homes.

Requiring parent involvement also appeared related to more effective programs.

The best summer programs tend to have the following characteristics (Curry 2011):

1. Smaller, individualized programs with parental involvement tend to be more effective.
2. Small programs tend to be more nimble, making them more efficient at planning, decision-making, and using available resources.
3. Summer programs should wrap up close to the beginning of the school year in order to prevent summer learning loss.
4. Programs should be planned to complement the upcoming school year’s curriculum.

AND FOR JAMAICA? CAMP SUMMER PLUS

With no data, it is hard to have an informed discussion on the situation in Jamaica. What we do know is that there is a huge demand for summer activities; families are always seeking out programmes in which to involve their children. Nonetheless, we also know that every summer sees the unleashing of unsupervised children; no reading, no enrichment, and no

new adventure in communities across the island. This happens in a context of low levels of performance in all our major assessments. Perhaps we need to begin taking a hard look, supported by hard data, at what really happens during the lazy, lazy days of summer.

This year the USAID Jamaica Basic Education Project, in partnership with the Ministry of Education, is introducing a new summer programme to combat the problem of summer learning loss. Camp Summer Plus is geared at 125 of the lowest performing students from eight schools in low income communities in Kingston. It features literacy and numeracy instruction delivered by five of the top performing teachers in Region One. They will be assisted by trainee teachers and enrichment – music, dancing, art, sports – facilitators. The selected students will receive wide exposure through field trips and motivational exchanges. The USAID/JBEP is geared up to use this as a learning experience and hopes that the model, if shown effective by the data they will collect, will be used throughout Jamaica with much success.

For more information on summer loss, visit <http://jamaica.kdid.org/library>.

Sources:

Cooper, Harris. 2003. “Summer Learning Loss: The Problem and Some Solutions.” *ERIC Digest* ED475391. <http://ericece.org/pubs/digests2003/cooper03.pdf>

Curry, Mary. 2011. “Math Programs Can Help Prevent Summer Learning Loss.” *MANGO Math*. <http://mangomath.com/2011/05/math-curriculum/math-programs-can-help-prevent-summer-learning-loss/>