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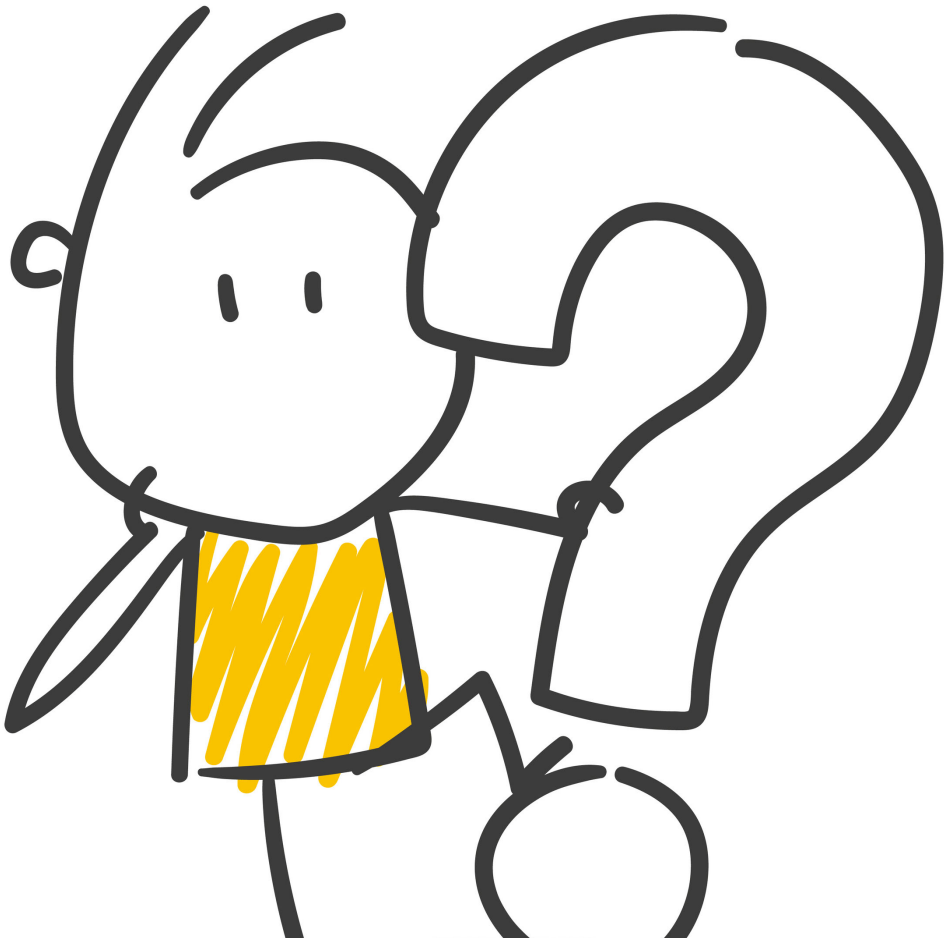
LEADING TRENDS

The Conundrum of Catching Up



A few months ago, a head asked one of us if he should even be wondering whether students could catch up cognitively to where they would have been without COVID. When he voiced this out loud, another consultant admonished that this was the wrong question to ask. Apparently, from the consultant's perspective, asking if children could catch up in class ignores their mental health, something that also suffered during the pandemic.

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It is interesting that this question would be seen as "wrong" when it is the exact question so many parents are asking, that the media is writing about, and that is clearly on the minds of educators at every level. As we talked further with the head, it seemed like there was a companion question—are there ways teachers can facilitate catching-up in academics without jeopardizing the students' well-being? Or even in ways that might help on the social and emotional side?

"Much happens in a classroom with solid teaching that is not quantified. The curriculum itself might be explicit on paper, but all the interactions, the expectations around class culture, how children are supported as they struggle to understand a concept or to control their drifting attention or to learn a new language skill that is challenging—those also have a framework to them that might not be obvious on a curriculum map."

Before COVID, assuming a vertically well-integrated curriculum, every teacher had goals for learning for the year that segued into where the next grade would start. For example, suppose you asked any fourth-grade teacher about their learning goals. In that case, they could immediately tell you their year-end math goals for students, and, if you asked the fifth-grade teachers at the same school, they could say both what preparation they expect the fourth graders would have by the end of fourth grade and how they—in fifth grade—would build on this so that when the class leaves fifth they are ready to take on the challenges of sixth grade. Likewise, faculty across all grades know how they facilitate social and emotional learning, inculcate classroom norms around behavior, and help students develop resilience when learning becomes hard and failures happen.

If faculty could have time – something always in short supply during the school year – a conversation across the grades on this issue could focus on teaching each other how they succeeded and share ideas about how to build in these qualities and experiences now. First grade teachers could share with those from second grade what they could do in second that in the before times would have happened in first grade were the first-grade teachers not trying to catch up to the losses these children brought with them from kindergarten. The second-grade teachers could look for ways to integrate this while still working with their students on readiness for the next grade, and so on grade to grade throughout the school.

Would the above scaffolding of previous learning into the next grade really work? Would kids eventually catch up cognitively and emotionally? We don't know the answer yet, but there seem to be so many internal resources to tap into to help build strength. Much happens in a classroom with solid teaching that is not quantified. The curriculum itself might be explicit on paper, but all the interactions, the expectations around class culture, how children are supported as they struggle to understand a concept or to control their drifting attention or to learn a new language

skill that is challenging—those also have a framework to them that might not be obvious on a curriculum map.

Perhaps thinking of this part of teaching and learning more deliberately would allow sharing across grades to build even more success for faculty and students alike.

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