

FROM THE PRESIDENT

This is the print-friendly version of the *SQE Forum* to download and read like a newspaper.

Highlights in this month's newsletter include a list of resources for **enlarging vocabulary**, a web-site about **teaching your kids to play bridge**, the **solution to the problems of special education students**, and a review of a book that explains that **anyone can excel at anything**.

If you know of an interesting article or book, please tell me about it by calling me at 519-884-3166 or e-mailing me at mdare@sympatico.ca.

I am always on the lookout for good stuff.

Regards, Malkin

YOUR VOTE IS IMPORTANT TO US

Last month, we wanted to know what you thought of our free reading program Stairway to Reading. We got a very poor response to this question and so, in an effort to generate more participation, this month we're tackling an extremely contentious topic – namely, the question of whether Ontario should fund faith-based schools. Do you think public support for faith-based schools is likely to generate religious friction and divisiveness? Perhaps you are more concerned about the fairness of the present policy of funding Catholic schools but those of no other religion?

You can weigh in on this controversial question by visiting www.societyforqualityeducation.org/newsletter/Sept07/pollSept07.htm. We will print some of your comments in the next newsletter.

SQE ACTIVITIES

- SQE is currently planning a visit from Dr. Howard Fuller, a former school superintendent in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Dr. Fuller is expected to visit Ontario in January 2008.

- SQE recently published a quick study on the similarities between Russian department stores and Ontario's centrally-planned schools.
www.societyforqualityeducation.org/media/quickstudyAug-07.htm
- In June, 2007 SQE provided funding for a C.D. Howe Institute policy seminar on school choice. The Institute expects to publish its report on the day's proceedings in late September or early October.

EVERYONE CAN HAVE A GOOD VOCABULARY

More and more, researchers are coming to realize the importance of a good vocabulary. After good reading ability, vocabulary is one of the most important determinants of educational success! Our archives contain a somewhat fuller explanation at

www.societyforqualityeducation.org/newsletter/archives/buildingvocab.pdf

Dr. Andrew Biemiller at OISE has spent years researching vocabulary acquisition in children and has learned some interesting things.

- School has almost no effect on vocabulary learning up to Grade 3
- Almost all children learn basic vocabulary in the same sequence
- Vocabulary can be effectively TAUGHT to young children at a rate of 10-15 words per week

Some of Dr. Biemiller's ideas are summarized in an article in *American Educator* which is at

www.aft.org/pubs-reports/american_educator/spring2001/vocab.html

Resources for Enlarging Younger Children's Vocabularies

www.vocabulary.co.il/

www.healthyplace.com/Communities/add/addfocus/vocabulary_1.htm

<http://record.wustl.edu/archive/1995/09-28-95/4234.html>

www.ivillage.co.uk/parenting/school/articles/0,,186590_500317,00.html

www.childdevelopmentinfo.com/learning/vocabulary.shtml

Resources for Enlarging Older Children's Vocabularies

www.vocabulary.com/

www.vocabulary.co.il/

www.vocabulary.com/VUlevelone.html

www.superkids.com/aweb/tools/words/middle/

MAIL BAG

Our readers' comments are always interesting and insightful. Here is some of the feedback we've received on funding faith-based schools, asking Aunt Malkin, the importance of ideas, teaching reading, and more.

Funding Faith-Based Schools

I support John Tory's quest to provide full funding for all faith-based schools. Those who argue that this funding is an affront to the public school system are creating a giant red herring, because under Tory's plan a more diverse educational community will still be a publicly-funded community. The core argument is really about secular values being the only set of values deemed important enough to be funded by the public. The secularists are asking for full control of the province's young minds so that they can shape them in a manner soothing to their personal belief systems. In so doing, they pass judgment, usually negative, on all communities whose values are different from their own. Parents need choice, and our diverse population requires a diverse publicly-funded educational system.

Reading Problems

You may recall our conversations of some time ago on my son's reading problems. When my son was in grade 10, I finally enrolled him in a private school. I was astonished in the improvement in teaching capability I found there. I had deliberately chosen a private school

specializing in LD and "direct teaching" because I had been unable to find this capability in the public high school system. The private school met this need immediately and I saw both my son's academic work and attitude toward school and learning improve quickly and remarkably.

Toronto, ON

Investing in ideas

I know of an 85-year-old man who lost his job with a Canadian government department because of his investigations into the behaviour of microbes in the presence of a substance which his boss deemed religiously offensive. The retired man pursued the project in his basement laboratory and has now taken out a number of patents. It is possible that the Canadian health care system will soon be paying large sums in order to cure a handful of devastating diseases using the fruits of his ideas. Had his former boss been receptive to an idea, we might have had control of these diseases years ago, using the products of Canadian industry. *Peterborough, ON*

John Mighton

In the June issue of the *SQE Forum*, you review John Mighton's latest book. I am tempted to write John to congratulate him on his many achievements. I used to keep up on them through his mother. My earlier connection with John was that I was his grade 9 math teacher. I remember him seated in the middle row, third seat back, blond hair, and very serious in his attention. Now, my hesitancy is due to the fact that I don't know if his ideas of what constitute errors in teaching methodology and his endeavours to rectify same may be due to the possibility that I may not have reached him. Not a serious problem for me, but something that arises in one's mind...

Dwight, ON

Ask Aunt Malkin

I completely agree with you that over the past few decades language usage, both written and spoken, has deteriorated. In my opinion, it is most vividly expressed in all the "art" younger people use when writing. They are forced to resort to these cute little hearts and stars because they lack the vocabulary to express themselves and the basic literacy skills to write expressively. I'm convinced these symbols are one of the many results of a poor education. *Sarnia, ON*

Stairway to Reading

My daughter and I have been using your free reading program for about a week now, an hour a day. So far, my daughter is enjoying the program. Her blending of the sounds is more spontaneous, and she is mostly good at saying each sound as she's dragging/writing a letter. We are using letter tiles for sound manipulation, blackboard and dry erase board for reading words, and her notebook for copying/spelling words. The Bingo game is a big reward for her at the end of the session. The way the lessons are set up, the student feels a great sense of accomplishment when reading the sentences/story provided in the reading material. I have seen my daughter's surprised look, as in "It's easier than I thought!" It is of course too early to tell how she will progress, although she is now saying that the Stairway to Reading program is one of her favourite parts of the day with math – which means a lot, since math is where her natural ability lies. I do notice less reticence at sounding out, and a new willingness to read aloud without complaining. She is also now reading aloud from one of her readers about ten minutes a day with no complaints – something she's never done before. All in all, it's very encouraging!

Central Planning

The lack of autonomy at the local school level, where teachers and principals are systematically thwarted in their attempts to exercise sound, independent judgment concerning the best interests of their students, is a serious and sad problem. A recent editorial in *The Globe and Mail* ("Fairly safe is not safe enough") provides a glowing example of this – of school principals under pressure from the Toronto District School Board not to exercise their own judgment (which would be to apply tougher discipline policies in response to assaults in schools). I can't imagine how frustrating this must be for many dedicated staff members, but the culture of heteronomy seems so deeply embedded now in public schooling that possibly nothing short of a massive teacher revolt would yield freedom and respect sufficient for teachers and principals to exercise their individual autonomy with a measure of impunity. *Regina, SK*

Systematic Oversight

Without an institutionalized system of oversight of teachers and a well-developed methodology, things will not improve. Many countries manage to impose sensible and decent teaching policies and methodologies and, as a result, their children benefit. In these countries, teachers are professionals who adhere to professional standards the way nurses and electricians do in our country. These teachers do not invent their own teaching styles, homework policies, or grading methods. They are given guidelines and are trained to work within these guidelines. If methodology is left up to individual teachers, many will choose the approach that entails the least amount of work. *Maryland, USA*

Math Curriculum

It turns out that as a result of the rush to re-arrange the math curriculum, there are no textbooks for university-bound students in grade 12 math this year. The solution for students is to borrow the old grade 11 math textbook, since what used to be in grade 11 is now taught in grade 12. Calculus is now a blend of other math strains, and some things have been entirely eliminated. This means that this year's grade 12 students are guinea pigs. Good luck to our future doctors, engineers, and scientists. *Huron County, ON*

Curriculum in General

When the Harris curriculum was implemented, I said, "I give it no more than five years. The ink will be barely dry on the curriculum documents when work on a redraft will begin." The regular swing of the curricular pendulum shows that the content that kids learn is generally arbitrary. How else can you explain the chasm between the unrealistic levels in the Harris curriculum and the non-curriculum of the Common Curriculum? I think there does need to be some co-ordination between what a kid knows when he arrives in grade 9 and what he needs to know in first-year university, but other than that, the thing a good teacher needs to do over four years of high school is to keep the kids meaningfully occupied and interested and learning to be discriminating. I just concentrate on getting the best kids to the next level.

WEB-SITE OF THE MONTH

This month, we feature an Ontario web-site called Parents for Educational Choice (www.parentseduchoice.org). This organization is composed of parents and others who believe in government-supported school choice. At the moment, the site is focusing on the controversy over John Tory's promise to fund the province's religious schools. The "Take Action" section includes a number of easy things people can do to show their support. Of particular interest is the information on Mr. Tory's respect and understanding for the unique identity of faith-based schools.

ASK AUNT MALKIN

A veteran of the school wars herself, with the scars to prove it, Malkin Dare has all kinds of advice to offer. If you would like some been-there-done-that advice from Aunt Malkin, call her at 519-884-3166 or e-mail her at mdare@sympatico.ca. This month, Aunt Malkin answers Sheila's question on whether her children are being challenged in school.

QUESTION

There's nothing I can really put my finger on, but I have the impression that my children aren't being challenged in school. They don't have any major problem areas, but I sense that they are capable of much more. Am I out to lunch?

Signed, Sheila in Sudbury

ANSWER

In my experience, parents are usually right about their children. If you tell me you think your children could be learning more, I suspect you are correct. The odds certainly favour it, since most Ontario elementary students are coasting through school without breaking a sweat.

Unfortunately, however, if you go to your children's school and ask for more challenging work, you are unlikely to get much joy. After all, you can hardly expect the teachers to take on a great deal of work and totally revamp their programs just to satisfy one parent. Of course, you're welcome to try, but you do run the risk of appearing unreasonable, demanding, and over-protective.

As with most of my advice, I have good news and bad news for you. The good news is – your children can learn more. The bad news is – it's up to you to make it happen.

I recommend that you begin to explore enrichment options. One possibility is to search out a public or private school with higher standards, as a few do offer more demanding options such as gifted classes, French immersion, and the International Baccalaureate. There are also private tutoring services such as Kumon Math or Sylvan Learning Centres, which emphasize the basics. You might also try assigning your own enrichment projects at home but, unfortunately, few children appreciate their parents' point of view and often balk at doing what they see as extra and unnecessary school work. A way around this problem is to withdraw your children from school and teach them at home. Home-schooled children typically thrive academically and socially, and they readily accept your assignments because you are now their teacher!

If none of these alternatives appeals to you, your children are probably out of luck if you stay in Ontario. Perhaps you might like to consider a move to Alberta or Singapore, educational jurisdictions whose students run rings around Ontario students.

FEATURE ARTICLES

Miss Winifred Banks

By Don Cropp

I entered Barnston Lane School sometime in 1944, having spent a few years attending sundry village schools in northern Wales following the persistent attentions of Herman Goering's Luftwaffe on our earlier homes in Wallasey. I was in Class 6, and my teacher was Miss Winifred Banks.

The military aspect of our school is well illustrated by the procedures by which the children were gathered into the school from the playground. A piercing blast of a whistle brought everyone to a standstill under the eagle eye of the teacher on duty (no movement, no talking). A second blast had us all running to our class places, resulting in lines of children in ordered ranks (girls to the right and boys to the left of the supervising teacher) like soldiers on parade.

A further blast of the whistle and a hand signal had the first, most senior, class turn and march off in a straight line, girls and boys to entrances at opposite ends of the school. After filing through the cloakrooms, we marched down the main corridor to our classrooms, keeping to the right of a yellow line painted down the centre.

Once inside our classroom, we received a morning's greeting from Miss Banks who bid us be seated. Talking or other distractions were not accepted as Miss Banks began the first lesson, for this was continuous evaluation with a vengeance. We wasted little time on crafts and music, nor did we have any scheduled physical education.

Miss Banks was a short woman with a teacher's bun of grey hair wound in a vertical coil to the back of her head. Her face was fleshy, with a florid complexion which increased in hue when she lost her temper. In common with other school ma'ams of the time, she wore long skirts, sensible shoes, and a teacher's smock which hung as a uniform cylinder from her ample bosom to her broad hips. She was a fearsome taskmistress.

In general, there was a standard week's timetable set out for us, with each major subject resulting in an item submitted for marking, including a dictation of 20 new words, an essay, a piece of penmanship, an arithmetic test, and one item on both history and geography. Routinely, we recited the multiplication tables to 12, tables of measurement of distance, weight, volume, and money (in the old complicated system in use in the U.K. at the time). Just as routinely, we were subjected to the application of the tables as mental arithmetic questions were fired at us. In addition to the old Imperial measures, we learned the rudiments of the metric system and the conversions between the two. We solved elementary algebraic equations, and we determined the value of π from measurement.

Since the number of students in the class varied from 48 to 52, the amount of marking which Miss Banks took home each evening must have been prodigious. The day of reckoning came to us weekly. Before dismissal on Friday afternoon, Miss Banks required us to total our marks for the week. We then collected our be-

longings and gathered at the front of the room. Counting down from 100, Miss Banks called out our personal total, as one by one we filed to our new desks for the following week. The top student sat at the back and right of the room, and the bottom student at the left and front of the room.

As part of the demands placed on the students, each arithmetic or spelling error had to be corrected after regular school hours. A misspelled word had to be written correctly three times and presented for approval, and similarly any incorrectly-solved arithmetic problem. If a line up of students developed, Miss Banks would send all but the few at its head to sit and work their way through some standard arithmetic problems. All of this additional work must have made the teaching day long indeed, as Miss Banks faced the prospect of carrying home another mountain of marking.

Toward the time of writing the Eleven Plus examination, we were put through a series of mock examinations, our efforts being subject to ruthless marking. Few of us "passed" these in-class exams, and once in a fit of temper Miss Banks slammed her yard-long blackboard ruler on her desk and predicted that less than an eighth of the class would pass the real thing. Being competent in the manipulation of fractions, we knew how many of us that represented! In the end, only two of the 48 students failed to pass the 1946 Eleven Plus – even though most of us came from a less glamorous part of the borough.

If there was a soft side to Miss Banks, it was in her love of poetry in general, and the poetry in the words of the King James Version of the Bible. The sight of this somewhat-overweight middle-aged woman prancing about in front of the class while reciting John Masefield's *Tewkesbury Road* was definitely worth the price of admission. The almost rapturous way in which she read Paul's Epistle to the Corinthians indicated that the sounds of the words were more important to her than their meanings.

To any question as to whether Miss Banks' class of 1946 was successful must come the resounding answer of "Yes!" Three of her former students graduated PhD, two of them finding positions on the staffs of universities. One other student became the head of a major

secondary school in London. That I myself was successful I owe in large part to Miss Banks. Sadly, my gratitude and respect for her did not extend to liking her, and I put this down to my response to the harshness of her régime.

(Mr. Cropp was an Ontario secondary school science teacher for over 30 years. He has now retired to the Peterborough area.)

The Special Education Dilemma Solving it with fluency

**By Carl Binder, Elizabeth Haughton, and
Barbara Bateman**

We all know fluency when we see it in a foreign language speaker. We say, “She spoke fluent Italian” when we observe a person speaking Italian smoothly, quickly, and without hesitation. It’s not just about saying the correct words. It’s also about achieving a useful pace or speed of performance. We have little difficulty recognizing a masterful athletic or musical performance. Carlos Santana, Chris Evert, Michael Jordan, Céline Dion, Tiger Woods, Ray Charles, Bonnie Raitt – they all have at least one thing in common: performances that are undeniably *fluent*. They all make the right moves without hesitation. They perform with the appropriate combination of accuracy plus speed (or quality plus pace). Even in people who are less well-known than these world-class performers, we recognize fluency as the hallmark of competence. Skilled computer users, mental mathematicians, or expressive readers share that combination of getting it right with ease and fluidity that characterizes all genuinely-accomplished people.

Fluency goes beyond mere accuracy to include the pace, or speed of performance. On a continuum from a total lack of measurable performance to mastery, 100% correct is only part of the way there. Since most educational assessment measures only accuracy, it cannot show any difference between accurate but struggling performance and fluent performance. Without measuring time, neither teachers nor learners can set fluency goals or precisely monitor progress toward those goals. It’s no wonder, then, that students in many educational programs often fail to achieve fluency. Instead, they progress by building one non-fluent skill on top of another

until the whole skill set becomes “top heavy” and falls apart. For example, when in *your* educational career did mathematics become difficult? For most people, math at some point became too unpleasant to pursue further because its foundation contained too many skills that were not fluent and were therefore difficult to apply. The result of piling too many non-fluent skills on top of one another is emotional stress, a sense of being overloaded, lack of attention span, and in extreme cases dropping out from school.

If you carefully observe children in the learning process, it is easy to understand why behavioural fluency is an essential factor in learning and performance of any kind. Both informal experience and scientific research suggest that fluency contributes directly to three types of critical learning outcomes.

- **Retention and maintenance:** the ability to perform a skill or recall knowledge long after formal learning programs have ended, without re-teaching in school year after year
- **Endurance:** the ability to maintain performance levels and attention to task for extended time periods while resisting distraction
- **Application:** the ability to combine and apply what is learned to perform more complex skills, creatively and in new situations

These are important outcomes that education is supposed to accomplish but which are sadly lacking in the long-term results of many educational programs. Parents usually see the lack of these outcomes as symptoms or problems that arise at homework time and when children try to apply what they’ve learned in school to life situations. Even in relatively successful students who do not falter in obvious ways, a lack of fluency in essential skills and knowledge can seriously limit their ability to achieve the full learning potential of which they are capable.

Consider the difference between a student who easily completes her homework and another student who avoids homework, completes it with difficulty, and seems unusually distractible. *The most obvious difference is a lack of fluency in the second child.* For example, on arithmetic “story problems” (dreaded by many students, teachers, and parents!), the more successful student is able to read problems rapidly and correctly, calculate

answers to basic math problems quickly and accurately, and complete other parts of the problem with relative ease. The struggling student, in contrast, falters while reading the problem, performs basic math with hesitation (perhaps counting fingers to compute basic sums), and may guess which phrases (such as “how many left?”) indicate specific types of calculations. When students lack fluency in the foundation skills, performance requiring application of those skills is likely to be painfully slow, difficult, and full of errors. Fluency should be an essential criterion at each step in an educational program because it allows students to progress smoothly through the learning process, building each successive layer on a previous layer of fluent prerequisite skills and knowledge.

Another way to understand the effects of fluency is that it frees up attention for higher-order application, rather than overloading attention with the mechanics of performance. Fluency in foundation skills frees attention for application, creativity, and problem-solving – the higher-order activities that make education valuable and fun. Parents usually comment that students with fluent foundation skills do their homework independently and enjoy new challenges. Teachers say that these students are a joy to teach and seem to love learning. On the other hand, when students struggle to form letters or digits, they have less attention for composition, calculation, or creativity. When they aren’t fluent on basic math facts, they have a hard time paying attention to the teacher’s demonstration of long division or adding fractions. When students can’t read fluently, there’s little attention for remembering, comprehending, or enjoying a story or essay.

Many of these struggling students are in special education. Most will achieve fluency only with supervised and frequent practice. Too often with these students, mastery to a given level of accuracy is the only goal. When that level is reached, or even before it is reached, the student is typically moved along immediately to new, more difficult material and never achieves fluency in the most basic skills. While the amount of work required and the level of expectation both increase, the student remains mired down, slowly and painfully slogging along, fal-

ling further behind and becoming more discouraged. Completing class assignments and homework becomes an impossibility. And fluency is never achieved.

Increased emphasis in special education on helping students achieve true fluency in all foundation skills before moving ahead would benefit not only the students, but also their teachers and parents. Central to every special education student’s schooling is his or her Individualized Education Program (IEP). Using fluency aims as the mandated measurable goals and objectives would greatly increase the usefulness of IEPs, making them far faster and easier to prepare and facilitating clear, honest, objective progress reporting to parents. Visible, explicit fluency aims would also lead to interventions focused on achieving essential levels of both speed and accuracy, i.e. on becoming fluent. *(Dr. Binder began his career as a doctoral student with B.F. Skinner, and spent the 1970’s conducting instructional research, training and supervising teachers. During the 1980’s and 1990’s, he applied fluency-based training and coaching methods in corporate settings while continuing work with educators and psychologists, frequently in collaboration with Elizabeth Haughton, in whose first grade classroom he had completed portions of his doctoral dissertation. He now speaks passionately to whoever will listen about the huge potential for improving education that exists in a fluency-based approach. Ms Haughton, Director of the Haughton Learning Center, has for over 30 years provided children with individual learning success programs using the principle of fluency in basic skills and a unique measurement system called Precision Teaching. Dr. Bateman began her special education career in the 1950s, in public schools and institutions. In the mid-60’s, she returned to Oregon and taught special education and special education law courses for 34 years at the University of Oregon.)*

This article was excerpted with permission from “Fluency: Achieving True Mastery in the Learning Process” at www.fluency.org/Binder_Haughton_Bateman.pdf. The article includes much more information, including how to measure fluency and how to help students achieve it.)

A Depressing English Curriculum

By Jason Toporowski

A couple of days ago, I wrote my Grade 12 English exam, then took a moment to reflect on what I'd learned – some grammar, essay format, and a lot about the three major literary works in the curriculum: *Hamlet*, *The Lord of the Flies*, and *Death of a Salesman*.

I couldn't help but feel as though my Grade 12 English experience was rather depressing – a feeling I know a lot of my fellow students shared – not because of the teaching (that aspect of the course was excellent), but because of those three works. While my teacher made a valiant effort to focus on the positive aspects of them, the general tone remained sombre.

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, his uncle kills his father and then marries Hamlet's mother. Hamlet's school friends, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, betray him, and in the last scene, Hamlet, his uncle, his mother, and Laertes, the nobleman who has morally wounded Hamlet, all died violently – a very depressing finish.

In William Fielding's *Lord of the Flies*, a group of English schoolboys become abandoned on an unoccupied island without anyone older than 12. The boys quickly descend into savagery, worshipping a beast they are sure is prowling the island, and kill two of their own. The book nears its end with the line: "Ralph wept for the end of innocence (and) the darkness of a man's heart."

Not exactly uplifting stuff.

But, believe it or not, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* may be the most depressing. The play focuses on Willy, who lives in a fantasy world revolving around his two sons, Biff and Happy. Throughout the book, he is contemplating suicide, lying to himself, and lying to his boys, and when Biff finally tries to pull Willy from his fantasy world to face the truth, Willy kills himself, hoping the insurance money will help Biff realize his potential.

In all three books, there's at least one death. In two of the books, suicide is considered, and in one it is carried out. In the book that doesn't contain suicide, its young characters carry out malicious murder. Each book focuses on the possibility of evil, depression, and betrayal of trust.

So the question is: Why are we teaching this in Grade 12? Why would the focus of an entire course, which is mandatory, be on death and depression? I could understand if one of the books was of this depressing nature, but all of them?

When you consider the fact that suicide is the second leading cause of death for teenagers and that for every completed suicide, there are roughly 30 attempts that fail, it doesn't seem all that logical – especially when the rate of depression in adolescents is widely considered to be about 20% among the general population. It makes you wonder what educators are thinking.

While it would be ridiculous for me to say that Grade 12 literature is causing these suicides and depression, it certainly isn't helping. Why a focus wouldn't be placed on the good aspects of life, possibly an uplifting story that involves the pursuit and attainment of goals, is beyond me.

I don't agree with those who point out that in order for us to truly appreciate the lives we have and understand the failures in our society that could occur, we need reminders such as these books. Turn on CNN for an hour; read the front section of a newspaper; listen to a news radio station and you will be instantly reminded that not only is our world imperfect – but that many real live issues are out there threatening us.

Maybe our Grade 12 curriculum, if it is set on creating awareness for issues, should focus on current, real issues – using newspaper articles and reports, instead of such works.

I was taught a great deal, my teacher was brilliant, but my classmates and I agreed the Grade 12 course would be better revised.

And I didn't even get into the other two books we read – George Orwell's dark political commentary *Animal Farm* and Aldous Huxley's futuristic *A Brave New World* – both of similar tone as the other three.

Let's take depression out of the curriculum and replace it with inspiration. After all, what do they always say about us? That we're the future. I don't think our future should be this depressing.

(*Mr. Toporowski of Kitchener, attends Kitchener-Waterloo. Reprinted with permission from The K-W Record, June 27, 2007*)

WHAT'S NEW?

Charter Schools on a Roll – In Alberta

Alberta Education is currently sitting on a report that compares how well the province's charter school students do with how well public school students do, as tested by provincial exams. It turns out that more charter school students achieve "acceptable" (91%) and "excellent" (33%) status than public school students (76% and 19%). Moreover, the charter school students are increasing their lead every year.

www.societyforqualityeducation.org/newsletter/sept07/charter.pdf

Charter School Students on a Roll – In New York

A federally-funded, multi-year Harvard study of New York's charter schools has released its preliminary results. For every year a student spends in an NYC charter school, his math scores improve 12% more than those of his public school peers, while his reading scores improve by 3.5% more.

www.nber.org/~schools/charterschoolseval/nyc_charter_schools_report_july2007.pdf

What a Difference a J Makes

Dalton J. McGuinty, the father of Ontario's premier, was strongly in favour of public funding for private schools. In a 1984 submission to the Shapiro Commission, he wrote, "My father worked at a lumber mill, and he worked hard and long to raise his six children. He served his country well and loved it – a lot more uncritically than I do. You know about what his salary was. But he worked extra hard and long to pay our fees through an independent alternative high school. We helped him all we could – knowing full well that he was in a sense paying double taxes for our schooling – that he was a second-class citizen not permitted by law to direct his taxes to the school of his choice.... In a free and just society, the rights of all are diminished if the rights of any one are infringed."

www.equalfunding.org/resources.html

Business Case against Universal Preschool

A recent study by economist Robert Lynch for the Economic Policy Institute, *an organization advocating universal preschool*, found real costs and questionable benefits for universal preschool. Among his findings specifically for Virginia: universal preschool would cost \$6,000 per child, to a total of \$847 million in 2008. Furthermore, it would take 11 years for the program to start paying for itself in societal benefits, and it would take 24 years for the program to pay for itself in budget benefits alone.

www.epi.org/content.cfm/book_enriching

Ontario Test Scores Flat-Lined

Ontario's "independent" testing body, the Education Quality and Accountability Office, has chosen to describe the results of this year's provincial tests as "sustaining improvement". That's one way to put it. Another would be to admit that, after years of slower and slower progress, the province's test scores have come to a full stop. With grade 6 reading scores frozen at a 64% pass rate, there is no chance that the Liberal government will be able to keep their promise that 75% of Ontario grade 6 students would pass the provincial tests by the end of their mandate.

www.eqao.com/pdf_e/07/07P016e.pdf

Getting the Fox Out of the Schoolhouse

A new report from the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies examines the role that the teachers' unions play in education. The report finds that the interests of teachers diverge from the interests of students in several areas – for example, strikes, seniority provisions, the instructional day, salary schedules, and class size restrictions – and that at present, provincial governments tend to favour the interests of the teachers over the interests of the students. The authors make a number of recommendations designed to bring about a better balance of power, by means of "reform initiatives that help to make schools more productive, teachers more professional, and the academic achievement of students more evident".

www.aims.ca/aimslibrary.asp?ft=1&id=1862

BOOK REVIEWS

The Cambridge Handbook of

Expertise and Expert Performance

Edited by K. Anders Ericsson et al

This book is a compilation of the research on expertise and expert performance. Most people assume that no one can become really, really good at what they do, as good as say Stephen Hawking at physics or Wayne Gretzky at hockey, unless they have been endowed with natural gifts, perhaps even genius, in their field. However, it has now been well established that “most types of expertise require at least a decade of extended efforts to attain the mechanisms mediating superior performance”. Furthermore, these “extended efforts” must include a particular type of practice, dubbed “deliberate practice”, which involves intense focus, study, and effort to make incremental improvements. In other words, it seems possible that almost anyone can be an elite performer in almost any field, if he or she is willing to invest the huge amount of painstaking work required. The excerpt is a case study of Mozart’s learning curve.

Excerpt (pages 769-770)

“I recently examined in detail the career development of Mozart who, sometimes along with Picasso, is often cited by researchers as the prototype of the creator whose abilities are impossible to understand without invoking a concept like talent or giftedness. Sternberg discussed Mozart’s accomplishments in the context of a critique of research on expertise, specifically of the notion that practice might be more important than talent in determining the level of achievement reached by an individual. Practice may be important in musical performance or swimming but, according to Sternberg, expertise researchers may have ignored domains in which talent is more important than practice (eg, musical composition or painting). According to Sternberg, practice cannot account for the ‘extraordinary early achievements’ of Mozart or Picasso.

‘Why was Mozart so damn good?... What made Picasso so good so young? What Mozart did as a child most musical experts will never do

nor be able to in their lifetimes, even after they have passed many times over the amount of time Mozart could possibly have had for deliberate practice as a child.... We fail to see evidence all around us – scholarly and common-sensical – that people differ in their talents, and that no matter how hard some people try, they just cannot all become experts in the mathematical, scientific, literary, musical, or any other domains to which they may have aspired. The truth is that practice is only part of the picture. Most physicists will not become Einstein. And most composers will wonder why they can never be Mozart’

(Costs of Expertise, 1996)

“One piece of evidence that raises questions for Sternberg’s view of Mozart is Hayes’s finding that the Ten-Year Rule holds even for him (and, as we shall see, it holds also for Picasso). As noted, Hayes’s analysis provides no information about the years before the first masterwork. Based on the hypothesis that expertise is necessary for creativity, and on the expertise literature, one might expect to find Mozart developing his skills over those years, as reflected, for example, in increasing production of compositions and in their increasing quality. There should also be evidence for the occurrence of deliberate practice during the formative years.

“In order to test those expectations, I looked in detail at Mozart’s development, in three ways. I examined the number of compositions produced during the various years of Mozart’s career and found that his output increased over the first ten years or so of his career, supporting the notion that he was mastering his craft. Second, I measured the quality of Mozart’s early compositions by determining the average number of recordings for each composition for each year. The quality of Mozart’s compositions increased over the early years of his career, which also supports the idea that he was honing his skill. Finally, there is evidence that Mozart was carrying out deliberate practice over those years under the direction of his father, a professional musician of some repute. Consider Mozart’s earliest piano concertos, the first four written at the ripe old age of 11, and the next three written when he was 16. Those works contain no original music by Mozart: they are simply arrangements of music of other composers.

Mozart's father may have used other's music as the basis for practice by the young man in writing for groups of instruments. Furthermore, if some of the *published* works by the young Mozart are based completely on the works of others, then Mozart's *private* tutelage from his father must also have centered on study of works of others. So Mozart learned his craft over many years, under the watchful eye of a professional teacher. This training is not different from that received today in schools of music by aspiring composers.

"These results call into question Sternberg's claim that most composers will never approach the accomplishments of Mozart's early years. We have just seen that a number of Mozart's early compositions show no originality on his part. Many of his other early works, which do contain his own music, have been more or less ignored by musicians and audiences, which means that those works are not 'so...good'. They have nothing distinctively 'Mozartian' about them. Thus, whereas it is no doubt true that most composers will not match Mozart's ultimate achievements, his early achievements are matched by many composers as they advance through music school."

Getting Choice Right

Ensuring equity and efficiency in education policy

by Julian R. Betts and Tom Loveless, editors

This book starts with two premises: firstly, that school choice is "here to stay and is likely to grow"; and secondly, that "the concept of school choice is neither good nor bad. In practice, choice policies may have positive or negative consequences, depending on the specific circumstances under which these policies are implemented". The articles in this book try to tease out which school choice policies will produce the best outcomes. The excerpt explores one of the possible reasons behind the finding that charter and private schools generate modestly-positive increases in their graduates' political tolerance, voluntarism, and community connectedness.

Excerpt (pages 236-237)

"The most novel, and in my opinion most intriguing, explanation for the apparent school choice advantage in promoting civic values is tied to the generally higher levels of order and discipline in schools of choice. Public charter schools and private schools tend to be better ordered educational institutions than neighbourhood public schools, especially in urban environments. A well-ordered and non-threatening educational environment likely contributes to students' feelings of security and confidence. Such feelings might be a necessary precondition for young people to develop a willingness to tolerate potentially-disruptive political ideas and political groups and to venture out into the community to promote social causes, an idea suggested by Alan Peshkin in his case study of a Christian fundamentalist school. Conversely, students who are educated in less safe and less predictable environments may develop strong fears of controversial political groups and ideas and hesitate to become involved in their communities or in political activities. By first establishing a safe and ordered educational environment for students, private and charter schools could unwittingly also be laying the foundation for students to become more engaged and tolerant citizens. Moreover, a physically-safe and secure environment may be the most effective setting for highlighting value-rich moral discussions, which might be considered too explosive in less secure environments. I am not aware of any rigorous empirical field studies that clearly connect a well-ordered educational environment with stronger civic values. However, there is a clear theoretical justification for the link, and I hope that future studies will explore it."

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