

## Living in a Fool's Paradise?

Many people think that Canada's high standing on the recent PISA tests means that Canadian students are doing well academically. But there is more to this story than meets the eye. In fact, the PISA tests say nothing about advanced academic learning - like, say, the ability to read sophisticated text or explain  $E=MC^2$ . Rather, the tests measure how well students can use very simple arithmetic and literacy skills to solve everyday problems.

Calculators are allowed on the tests, spelling and grammar mistakes are not penalized, partial marks are liberally awarded for incorrect answers, and the students are never asked to write answers of more than a few words.

The PISA sponsors make it clear that they are not trying to assess the skills and knowledge that one would normally expect to be taught to 15-year-olds. Instead, their test is designed to find out how well students are prepared "to meet the challenges of the future".

This means that the tests are designed to discover how intelligently students can tackle practical tasks, like interpreting diagrams or estimating results. In contrast, skills like the ability to craft a persuasive argument or solve quadratic equations are irrelevant to the PISA.

Here's an example of a typical PISA question. "A pizzeria serves two round pizzas of the same thickness in different sizes. The smaller one has a diameter of 30 cm and costs 30 zeds. The larger one has a diameter of 40 cm and costs 40 zeds. Which pizza is better value for money? Show your reasoning."

The simplicity of the PISA tests means that they neutralize much of the advantage enjoyed by students with advanced skills and knowledge. These tests simply do not tell us how well our students stack up against their counterparts in India and China (countries which, by the way, don't take part in the PISA tests).

If we want to know how well Canadian students are prepared in terms of more difficult material, we must look at other international tests, such as the 2005 Adult Literacy and Life Skills survey. This test measured both the literacy and numeracy of more than 23,000 Canadians, as well as students in other countries.

Canada ranked roughly in the middle of the countries that chose to participate in this test. According to Statistics Canada, the test showed a decline in literacy scores among young people aged 16 to 25. It also confirmed the results of an earlier study which showed that approximately "42% of Canadian adults aged between 16 and 65 years are below the level of literacy considered appropriate in order to function effectively in today's society".

Of course, it is important that Canadian students are well prepared to meet the practical challenges of the future, but there is also value in ensuring that they can read and write at

advanced levels, as well as solve difficult mathematical problems and understand chemistry and physics.

After all, Canadian hairdressers and plumbers are not at much risk of losing their jobs to better-educated international competitors. Rather, it's the white-collar jobs, like computer programming, that are most vulnerable to offshoring. For example, it seems clear that Japanese engineers' jobs are safe for the foreseeable future - unlike those of their Canadian counterparts.

It is important for Canada's future that we not be lulled into a false sense of complacency by our good results on the PISA.