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FROM THE PRESIDENT

This is the full version of the *SQE Forum* to read on your monitor. To download the print-friendly version, click [here](#). Highlights in this month's newsletter include a feature article on **teaching three-year-old Aidan to read**, down-home **advice on French immersion**, and "It's Being Done", a review of a book that proves **disadvantaged children can learn**.

If you like our newsletter and would like to help our work, please consider making a financial donation (any amount is appreciated) by clicking [here](#). We accept no government funding, but instead depend on our supporters to fund our operations. All contributions get a tax receipt, along with our heartfelt thanks.

Your feedback helps us improve the *Forum*. Please e-mail me [here](#).

Best regards, Malkin

YOUR VOTE IS IMPORTANT TO US

Last month, we asked whether the requirement to take the old Ontario departmental examinations was beneficial or harmful to your education. The results are as follows: 71% thought the exams were beneficial; 7% thought they were harmful; and 21% couldn't make up their minds.

This month, we want to find out how people feel about Al Gore's film "An Inconvenient Truth" being shown in elementary and high schools. Please help us by clicking on [vote](#). If you choose to post a comment, your name will be entered into a draw for a \$50 Chapters/Indigo gift certificate. We will print some of your comments in the next newsletter.

SQE ACTIVITIES

- The Society has provided funding for a C.D. Howe Institute policy seminar on the subject of choice in public education. The event will take place in June. Seminar participants will include leading policy-makers, academics, education ministry officials, school administrators, and invited guests. The Institute expects to publish a report that will draw on the day's proceedings within a few months of the event.

- The Society is providing funding to a Toronto publicly-funded school to fully outfit one classroom with *Open Court* materials. Although *Open Court* is an excellent phonics program, the school cannot use its literacy funding to purchase it because the program is not on Ontario's approved list of textbooks. There are no phonics textbooks on the approved list.

EVERYONE CAN KEEP BUSY

With summer vacation time fast approaching, here are some sites from Franlie Allen to help keep minds active and avoid the dreaded "I'm bored!" chant in your home.

http://birding.about.com/od/birdrelatedactivities/Bird_Related_Activities.htm

This site contains links and information for the fledgling birding enthusiast and those who may wish to identify some of the feathered fauna along the trails or in their own neighbourhoods.

www.wingedsandals.com

This very cool site was designed to take advantage of the latest technologies and "inspire a thirst for the classics in a new generation". Of particular interest is the Who's Who in Classical Mythology which was created to complement this site. There are interactive activities, games, and goodies such as e-cards and screensavers. It was produced by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in association with The University of Melbourne's Centre for Classics and Archaeology. Both HTML and Flash versions available.

<http://web.info.com/infocom.us2/search/web/Kids%20Activities?CMP=2847&itkw=Kids%20Activities>

This site provides links to lots of kid-oriented sites – free games, fitness tips, crafts, video game hints, and much more.

www.carolinaclassical.com/links.html

This is a great index of classical music sites. Find links to MIDI files, historical music sites, genre and theory-based sites.

www.ataso.ca/EOC%20Culture%20and%20Heritage.htm

This site promotes Aboriginal Cultures in Southern Ontario and offers opportunities to experience a diversity of ancient cultures in one destination.

MAIL BAG

Our readers' comments are always interesting and insightful. Here is some of the feedback we've received on departmental examinations, well-paid bureaucrats, school board monopolies, special education, and more.

Public School Monopoly

The public education establishment is used to a monopoly situation. They have been able to set the rules without challenge. The only realistic alternative for parents displeased with the service has been to scrimp together the money to send their child to a private school. Lack of competition leads to some very unhealthy results. *Toronto, ON*

Departmental Exams - Harmful

I voted that departmental exams were harmful, after some thought. On the plus side, I wrote them and did well (positive for me). Exit exams can make the senior year a better one for teachers and students as they work together to prepare. There will be less of a fall-off in work towards the end of the final semester. On the minus side, the departmentals were found to be less of a predictor of student success than teacher grades. One-size-fits-all exams are inappropriate, especially for the many students who do not go on to university. Many of the important skills, for example honesty, responsible citizenship, critical thinking, and creativity, are not well tested with exams. Finally, the curriculum gets narrowed to what is easily tested. I am not against tests, but the research is clear that it is the quality feedback and instruction between tests that results in learning. Exit exams come too late to make a real difference. *Toronto, ON*

Departmental Exams - Beneficial

While everything for the whole year pretty well depended on that particular set of exams, it certainly put the year in focus. On the other hand, there was no opportunity for individual teachers to play favourites with their students (or vice versa). In addition, writing the departmental exams prepared students for the stress of university exams. While things were far from perfect in the fifties and early sixties, I believe firmly that, even though grades were much lower then, students generally knew more and were able to deal with the pressures better. *Sanford, ON*

More Well-Paid Bureaucrats

With respect to well-paid bureaucrats, you ain't seen nuthin' yet. What with union demands, citizen's demands, and protection of jobs, well we shall go broke before the globe gets hot! I would replace all the school boards and the ministry of education with an Ontario Education Authority accountable to the Lieutenant Government or even the House of Commons through the speaker. I am saying – get education out of the political arena. *Sudbury, ON*

Truly Catholic Schools

School choice in Ontario could be much increased if the Catholic school system were more inclusive. Although a member of a Protestant minority, I attended a Catholic school in Germany. I learned a lot about tolerance from the Franciscan nuns who not only accepted Protestants into their school but even hired a religion teacher to instruct us in our own faith while our classmates received their religion instruction. More tolerance was learned during the three daily prayer sessions, in which we either participated or stood in silent meditation. I never encountered a trace of pressure or prejudice. The experience left me with a great deal of esteem for the nuns, their open-mindedness and generosity. Furthermore, the more staunchly-Protestant members of my extended family lost some of their fear of and increased their respect for a religion with which they had previously avoided all contact. I have never understood why a system that worked in Germany during a time of great adversity between Catholics and Protestants would not work in Canada. *Markham, ON*

Departmental Exams – Beneficial

Although I loathed the preparation and the resultant anxiety, departmental exams were a wonderful preparation for the rigours of university. I had been an 80+ student until the grade 13 exams – what a rude awakening! My final average dropped almost 10%, as did most of my classmates'. In retrospect, the exams were fair. All students across the province were measured by the same standard, and the Ontario Scholar award had real meaning. I started teaching in 1968, and for the next 20 years I watched the standards decline to the point that more than a quarter of the student body now receives marks above 80%. The departmental exams were a reality check. Many students were forced out of the university stream and into more realistic career paths. Many went on to learn a trade. It is beyond me why universities are not demanding a common set of entrance exams across the province. *North Bay, ON*

Teacher Expectations

While on another mission, I came across a telling piece from a presentation to teachers that concludes that teacher expectations match and predicate student success outcomes. This is sadly representative of what many parents experience. *Toronto, ON*

Departmental Exams Beneficial – But

The exams were beneficial, but their value had absolutely nothing to do with education. Their value was their strong lesson on how to deal with extreme stress – both in prior preparation and in the writing situation. *King City, ON*

School Board Amalgamation

Your thinking on school board amalgamation is most interesting and frankly runs counter to what I had earlier thought would be the case. I'm prepared to buy your argument! But I must tell you that it's the first time I have heard that there's competition among dentists. Would that such were the situation around here! Talking about competition, a dentist here in Collingwood told me some years ago that the Dental Association can set fee schedules as high as they want because the vast majority of patients are on dental plans – so that high fees don't matter much to them. Please, don't get me going on dentists. Their incomes bear no relationship to their work or to their hours. And those on plans pay no tax on their benefits. *Collingwood, ON*

Special Education

Down here in the trenches, it seems to be getting worse instead of better. One of my son's best friends came to Canada from Columbia via Miami three years ago at the start of grade 6. He told me this week that he was originally designated as having special needs and given an Individual Education Program. Now that his class is about to graduate from grade 8 and go to high school, I asked the boy if he will be going to Richview Collegiate (a good high school) with my son. He responded that he can't go to Richview, because the school doesn't accept students with special needs. He further told me that he hasn't learned anything during the two years he has been at his present school, because the teachers send him to do all his work and tests to the Communications Room, where they just give him all the answers!!! He said "I don't study for the tests because they give me the answers." He told me all this not smugly, but sincerely concerned for his future. This boy spends a lot of time in my home. He is very mature, quite sensible, and very responsible, and need never have been labeled at all from where I'm standing. *Toronto, ON*

WEB-SITE OF THE MONTH

This month, we feature www.brainsarefun.com, a comprehensive site for teachers and parents with a plethora of resources to promote academic success and positive character and behaviour development in all students. The author, Rory Donaldson, is an experienced parent and educator who has made this web-site a personal project to share effective and proven teaching strategies and helpful resources (such as sample contracts and homework management plans). There is so much information that the reader is best advised to start at <http://brainsarefun.com/Alphainx.html> and click on the link near the top, "How to get started, Fast!" and go from there.

ASK AUNT MALKIN

A veteran of the school wars herself, with the scars to prove it, Malkin Dare has all kinds of advice for parents. This is the first in this series. If you would like some been-there-done-that advice from Aunt Malkin on a schooling issue that is worrying you, click [here](#) to send in your question. This month, Aunt Malkin answers a parent's question as to whether or not she should enroll her six-year-old daughter in French immersion.

Answer

There are two main reasons for choosing French immersion (FI). The first reason is because you want your child to learn French, and the second is so that your child will receive an enriched education.

With regard to the first reason, you should be aware that few children emerge from existing FI programs with fluent French, as most school boards offer a sort of “whole language” French program, as opposed to the very structured, clearly-taught program that works best.

In addition, there are few FI graduates with fluent French since almost every student drops out at some point along the way. Locally, only about one percent of FI students graduate from high school with a FI diploma. As well, the shortage of native-tongue French teachers means that most FI graduates end up speaking a kind of Frenglish with a heavy English accent and lots of ungrammatical Anglicisms. On the other hand, students with some FI typically understand spoken French well and they tend to be supremely confident of their ability to make themselves understood.

With regard to the second reason for choosing French immersion (an enriched education), it is true that the stronger students tend to be in the FI classes, since the struggling students mostly drop out as they rise through the grades. This is of course great for the survivors, but it is quite hard on the drop-outs, who tend to regard themselves as failures, especially in the early years. In addition, the English language spelling of FI students takes terrible hits, as the students often randomly add the letter “e” here and there, nor do they ever really master the concept of double letters. An English word like “address” can show up as “adresse” or “adrese” or “adress,” for example.

Yer pays your money and yer takes your chances!

FEATURE ARTICLES

Free to Choose to Learn

Few ideas in education are more controversial than vouchers—letting parents choose to educate their children wherever they wish at the taxpayer's expense. First suggested by Milton Friedman, an economist, in 1955, the principle is compellingly simple. The state pays; parents choose; schools compete; standards rise; everybody gains.

Simple, perhaps, but it has aroused predictable—and often fatal—opposition from the educational establishment. Letting parents choose where to educate their children is a silly idea; professionals know best. Cooperation, not competition, is the way to improve education for all. Vouchers would increase inequality because children who are hardest to teach would be left behind.

But these arguments are now succumbing to sheer weight of evidence. Voucher schemes are running in several different countries without ill-effects for social cohesion; those that use a lottery to hand out vouchers offer proof that recipients get a better education than those that do not.

Harry Patrinos, an education economist at the World Bank, cites a Colombian programme to broaden access to secondary schooling, known as PACES, a 1990s initiative that provided over 125,000 poor children with vouchers worth around half the cost of private secondary school. Crucially, there were more applicants than vouchers. The programme, which selected children by lottery, provided researchers with an almost perfect experiment, akin to the "pill-placebo" studies used to judge the efficacy of new medicines. The subsequent results show that the children who received vouchers were 15-20% more likely to finish secondary education, five percentage points less likely to repeat a grade, scored a bit better on scholastic tests and were much more likely to take college entrance exams.

Voucher programmes in several American states have been run along similar lines. Greg Forster, a statistician at the Friedman Foundation, a charity advocating universal vouchers, says there have been eight similar studies in America: seven showed statistically significant positive results for the lucky voucher winners; the eighth also showed positive results but was not designed well enough to count.

The voucher pupils did better even though the state spent less than it would have done had the children been educated in normal state schools. American voucher schemes typically offer private schools around half of what the state would spend if the pupils stayed in public schools. The Colombian programme did not even set out to offer better schooling than was available in the state sector; the aim was simply to raise enrolment rates as quickly and cheaply as possible.

These results are important because they strip out other influences. Home, neighbourhood and natural ability all affect results more than which school a child attends. If the pupils who received vouchers differ from those who don't—perhaps simply by coming from the sort of go-getting family that elbows its way to the front of every queue—any effect might simply be the result of any number of other factors. But assigning the vouchers randomly guarded against this risk. Opponents still argue that those who exercise choice will be the most able and committed, and by clustering themselves together in better schools they will abandon the weak and voiceless to languish in rotten ones. Some cite the example of Chile, where a universal voucher scheme that allows schools to charge top-up fees seems to have improved the education of the best-off most.

The strongest evidence against this criticism comes from Sweden, where parents are freer than those in almost any other country to spend as they wish the money the government allocates to educating their children. Sweeping education reforms in 1992 not only relaxed enrolment rules in the state sector, allowing students to attend schools outside their own municipality, but also let them take their state funding to private schools, including religious ones and those operating for profit. The only real restrictions imposed on private schools were that they must run their admissions on a first-come-first-served basis and promise not to charge top-up fees (most American voucher schemes impose similar conditions).

The result has been burgeoning variety and a breakneck expansion of the private sector. At the time of the reforms only around 1% of Swedish students were educated privately; now 10% are, and growth in private schooling continues unabated.

Anders Hultin of Kunskapsskolan, a chain of 26 Swedish schools founded by a venture capitalist in 1999 and now running at a profit, says its schools only rarely have to invoke the first-come-first-served rule—the chain has responded to demand by expanding so fast that parents keen to send their children to its schools usually get a place. So the private sector, by increasing the total number of places available, can ease the mad scramble for the best schools in the state sector (bureaucrats, by contrast, dislike paying for extra places in popular schools if there are vacancies in bad ones).

More evidence that choice can raise standards for all comes from Caroline Hoxby, an economist at Harvard University, who has shown that when American public schools must compete for their students with schools that accept vouchers, their performance improves. Swedish researchers agree. It seems that those who work in state schools are just like everybody else: they do better when confronted by a bit of competition. *(Reprinted with permission from The Economist, May 3, 2007)*

Teaching Aidan to Read

By Nancy Wagner

In my last "Letter from the President", I mentioned that I would like to try to teach my grandson to read before he started school. I also promised that I would report back on this endeavor. So, with his parents on board and Malkin's assurance that this was not only a relatively easy exercise but a pleasurable and rewarding one as well, we began.

Malkin lent me a book called *How to Teach Your Child to Read in 10 Minutes a Day* by Sidney Ledson. This author had taught his own preschoolers to read and, through trial and error, developed a simple step-by-step program using systematic phonics.

We began just before Aidan turned three. All started easily enough. Aidan enjoyed learning the letter sounds and the first game that was introduced to emphasize and practice the lessons learned. But after a few weeks, just as he was starting to put letters together to make simple words – pup, cup – his parents noticed that he was doing a lot of squinting and, when I worked with him, his letter and word recognition often depended on the medium used (and, looking back, at the size of the letters).

After a visit to the doctor and subsequently, an optometrist, Aidan was outfitted with glasses that he must wear all the time. His eyesight was so bad that the optometrist said he should have had glasses "years ago". The vision problems are relevant only in that the timeline for this learning to read experiment was greatly extended until we sorted out Aidan's vision. Also, by now there was a new baby in the house.

Lessons began again. Other families more organized than ours would probably have accomplished more in far less time. However, by winter of this past year Aidan was starting to sound out simple words – words he hadn't memorized.

About this time we bought Aidan *The Leap Frog* {learn-to-read} videos. They were a great tool for an emergent reader. The first one is called *The Letter Factory*, and it teaches the alphabet and the most common sound of each letter. You know how children can sit and watch the same movie or TV show over and over? Well that's what Aidan did with these. For him they felt just like entertainment: colourful characters, simple songs, happy endings.

All the while, the basic rules of phonetic reading were being reinforced. The second video, *The Word Factory*, starts putting the sounds into simple three letter words, and the third introduces silent 'e' and more complex letter combinations like 'th', 'ch', and 'sh'.

I asked Malkin if she had any basic phonetic readers we could borrow, and she loaned us a series called *Primary Phonics* by Barbara Makar, published by Educators Publishing Service. Almost immediately, Aidan

was tackling these simple books successfully. He couldn't get enough of them! The readers build the child's reading skills through repetition and the gradual introduction of new phonetic elements as each skill is embedded.

Soon we were in a routine where Aidan would read a book to me or his parents and then we would read the next one to him. Very quickly, he was self-correcting. As he progressed through each reader, he was making very few mistakes. One day he was helping me make supper and noted the word "bake" on the digital readout on my oven. He told me that the oven said "bake" because the word had the silent "e" on the end. Then he explained that if the silent "e" wasn't there the oven would say "back", and wouldn't that be silly.

Aidan reads with inflection, which I admit surprises me. He still loves to be read to, so his bedtime routine now involves being read to from a chapter book, followed by him reading a few of his phonics readers to his doggie.

Aidan is now four years old. He began to read on his own just before his fourth birthday. As his grandmother, I am comforted that he will start junior kindergarten this fall a confident and enthusiastic reader who is able to easily decode new words he encounters.

The most remarkable (and slightly embarrassing) part of this exercise is that Aidan learned to read without much adult effort. We read to him and encouraged his own reading, but for the most part he learned on his own. The simple rules of phonics in a fun 'kid-friendly' presentation were all it took.

I think many people have the idea that learning to read is a monumental task best left to professionals. What this experience has taught us is that learning to read can be incredibly simple for some kids when taught the right way.

(Mrs. Wagner is the former president of the Society for Quality Education and the proud grandmother of two.)

Good Citizenship

By Patrick J. Wolf

Do assigned public schools have a comparative advantage over public schools of choice and private schools in steeping their charges in the civic values necessary for democratic citizenship? The theoretical argument in favor of such an advantage is both intuitive and popular. As free government schools, open to all on equal terms, public schools make an important statement about equality, a fundamental democratic value. Former education secretary Richard Riley aptly captured this perspective, noting that civic values are "conveyed not only through what is taught in the class-

room, but by the very experience of attending [a public] school with a diverse mix of students.”

Many supporters of school choice argue that neighborhood assignment to public schools results not in what public school advocates celebrate but in just the opposite: schools that are less likely to contain a diverse mix of students and that are more internally segregated along racial lines than are schools of choice. In recent years, a number of empirical studies of the effects of school choice on civic values have been published. As the extent of school choice in American education continues to grow—the latest data from the Department of Education show that 26 percent of American students attended a school other than their closest neighborhood public school—it is time to take stock of the evidentiary record on whether assigned public schooling better prepares students for their responsibilities as citizens in a democracy.

Studying the Effects of Choice on Civic Values

For this review, I examine the results of 21 quantitative studies regarding the effects of school choice on seven civic values that relate to the capacity of individuals to perform as effective citizens in our representative democracy. The values, in order from the most studied to the least studied, are political tolerance, voluntarism, political knowledge, political participation, social capital, civic skills, and patriotism.

The 59 findings from existing studies suggest that the effect of private schooling or school choice on civic values is most often neutral or positive. Among the group of more-rigorous studies, 12 findings indicate statistically significant positive effects of school choice or private schooling on civic values and 10 suggest neutral results. Only one finding from the rigorous evaluations indicates that traditional public schooling arrangements enhance a civic value.

The studies that employ only basic adjustments for likely self-selection paint an even rosier picture of the positive effects of school choice on civic values. Of the 36 findings, 21 indicated a school choice advantage in promoting preparation for citizenship. Thirteen neutral results appear in this collection of analyses, and two findings show benefits from traditional public schooling. The reader is cautioned not to draw strong conclusions from these studies, however, since they employed only rudimentary methods for addressing the problem of selection bias.

We now consider the specific civic values that appear to be affected by school choice arrangements.

Studies of Political Tolerance

With one exception, the findings regarding the effect of school choice on political tolerance are confined to the neutral-to-positive range. Eleven findings—five of them from the more-rigorous studies—indicate that school choice increases political tolerance. For example, one experi-

mental voucher study in Washington, D.C., found that nearly one-half of the students who switched to a private school said they would permit a member of their disliked group to live in their neighborhood, compared with just over one-quarter of the students in the public school control group. Three studies that used sophisticated non-experimental techniques to control for selection bias also found positive effects of choice arrangements on political tolerance.

Studies of Voluntarism

The ideal citizen not only tolerates dissent but also actively serves the community. With one exception, studies regarding the extent to which private schooling or school choice affects the likelihood that students or parents will volunteer their time in community enterprises range from neutral to positive.

Studies of Political Participation, Social Capital, Civic Skills, and Patriotism

Beyond being tolerant, community minded, and well informed, we also expect well-trained citizens to be politically active possessors of social capital with civic skills who are loyal to their country. Unfortunately, relatively few studies have queried the extent to which school choice arrangements foster such attributes. One rigorous study, by Thomas Dee, concluded that Catholic schooling increases voter turnout as adults. Jay Greene and his colleagues conducted less-sophisticated studies that found that Latinos who received all of their K–12 education in private schools were 16 percent more likely to say they voted in the last presidential election than comparable Latinos who were educated exclusively in public schools. They also reported that Texas adults who were educated at least partly in private schools were 9 percent more likely to have voted recently, all else being equal. An observational study by Christian Smith and David Sikkink found that parents who enroll their children in private religious schools or who home school them are more politically active than are otherwise comparable parents who enroll their children in public schools. Parents of students in private secular schools do not differ significantly from public school parents in political participation.

Discussion

In summary, the empirical studies to date counter the claims of school choice opponents that private schooling inherently and inevitably undermines the fostering of civic values. The statistical record suggests that private schooling and school choice often enhance the realization of the civic values that are central to a well-functioning democracy. This seems to be the case particularly among ethnic minorities (such as Latinos) in places with great ethnic diversity (such as New York City and Texas), and when Catholic schools are the schools of choice. Choice programs targeted to

such constituencies seem to hold the greatest promise of enhancing the civic values of the next generation of American citizens.

(Dr. Wolf is professor of education reform and 21st century chair in school choice at the University of Arkansas College of Education and Health Professions. Excerpted with permission from Education Next, Summer 2007. The complete article is at www.hoover.org/publications/ednext/7460537.html.)

WHAT'S NEW?

[Charter Schools Multiplying](#)

The Center for Education Reform's "2007 Annual Survey of America's Charter Schools" reports that the number of charter schools grew by 11% in 2006, serving a student body that is on average 53% minority and 54% low-income. There were a total of 3,940 charter schools operating this year.

[more](#)

[Setting Them Up to Fail](#)

"Setting Them Up to Fail" is the title of a report from the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies which examines the relationship between teacher-assigned marks and provincial examination results. It finds that significant grade inflation is present in New Brunswick and Newfoundland high schools, all too often accompanied by lower-than-average results on provincial math examinations. [more](#)

[Knowledge is Power](#)

Every year, KIPP (a group of 52 American charter schools that get amazing results with their disadvantaged middle-school students) presents demographic profiles and student achievement results for each of its long-term schools. Even though KIPP students typically start the program several grade levels behind, by grade 8 the average student has gained 24 percentile points in reading and 29 percentile points in math. [more](#)

[Suspensions: Buy the Numbers](#)

Using Freedom of Information data, Bob Clements looked at how many exceptional students have been suspended over the years in his school board. In 2001/2000, exceptional students constituted 24.5% of suspended students. During the next three years, the percentage of suspended students who were exceptional hovered around the 40% mark, and in 2004-2005, the percentage jumped to 70.1%. [more](#)

[School Choice Saves – In More Ways Than One!](#)

The Friedman Foundation's report "Education by the Numbers: The Fiscal Effect of School Choice Programs, 1990-2006" provides the first analysis of the cost of school choice programs in the US. Over the course of these 16 years, school choice programs generated nearly \$444 million in net savings to government. [more](#)

BOOK REVIEWS

***The End of Ignorance: Multiplying our human potential.* John Mighton**

John Mighton is a Toronto mathematician and the founder of JUMP Math, a system he developed for teaching and learning math. He is also an award-winning author and playwright. In this book, Dr. Mighton diplomatically but devastatingly demolishes the constructivist approach used in most Canadian public schools to teach math. His book conceives of a world in which no child is left behind – a world based on the assumption that every child has the potential to be successful in every subject. JUMP has proved so successful that an entire class of grade 3 students, including so-called slow learners, scored over 90% on a grade 6 math test. Drawing on new research in brain development, Dr. Mighton calls for a re-examination of the assumptions which underlie current teaching. Here is an excerpt that gives a fascinating insight into children's minds.

Excerpt (pages 97-98)

“We will never fully develop the potential of children until we recognize that they are unimaginably different from adults. Adults think that repetition is tedious, so they fail to give children the practice they need to consolidate their understanding of skills and concepts. Adults think that familiar facts are boring, so they seldom ever give children enough time to explore those facts. Adults think that extending an obvious pattern is pointless, so they don't allow children to test that a pattern goes on forever, nor do they allow them to demonstrate their amazing ability to handle more and more complex variations on a simple theme. Adults rarely raise the bar for children very effectively or capture their attention in mathematics, because they don't know how to see the world through the eyes of children. I have seen many classes jump up and down with excitement simply because I made the numbers in a question larger, and because I gave the weakest students a chance to show off...

“Practice doesn't have to be painful for children, and repetition doesn't have to involve what teachers call 'drill and kill'. If teachers are careful to introduce subtle variations into the work they assign, if they constantly raise the bar without raising it too far, and if they make learning into a game of different levels and twists and turns, then kids will practise and train effortlessly.”

***It's Being Done: Academic success in unexpected schools.* Karin Chenoweth**

Many educators explain away their students' low academic achievement on the basis of the children's low socio-economic status. This book, however, proves that even disadvantaged, immigrant children can be taught to a high level, profiling 15 American schools that are doing exactly that. These schools are not just good schools for poor children; they are good

schools for any child. The author shows that an unyielding belief in the ability of all children – regardless of background – to excel at the highest levels, combined with a relentless commitment to excellent instruction can transform people’s lives. Here is an interesting excerpt which describes the atmosphere in these break-the-mould schools.

Excerpt (pages 3-4)

“The two years I spent visiting schools were a revelation in a lot of ways. I began this project not knowing at all what I would find. I was identifying schools solely on the basis of their student achievement test scores, and for all I knew (and feared), I would find the soul-deadening test-prep factories that we are told characterize high-poverty and high-minority schools that do well on state assessments. Perhaps, I worried, I would find schools where the teachers and principals are worn to a frazzle, burnt-out and bitter with all the expectations that have been placed on their shoulders. Or even worse, maybe I would find schools where the teachers were robotic automatons robbed of all their creativity.

“I found none of that. Instead, I found dedicated, energetic, skilled professionals who talk about the needs of children and who care deeply about whether all their students have access to the kinds of knowledge and opportunities that most middle-class white children take for granted. That means they care about and include in their teaching art and music and physical fitness and field trips and science and history and all the things that some people say must be cut out of schools in order to focus on the reading and math skills tested in state assessments. That doesn’t mean that the people in the schools I have visited don’t care deeply about reading and math and about doing well on state assessments, but they know that it is a mistake to ‘narrow the curriculum’ and ‘teach to the test’...

“And, happily, I found teachers and principals who love their jobs. They work hard, and some work long hours. They may occasionally be tempted to move to schools where it might be easier to teach. But they stay on the job because, as one teacher said to me, ‘We’re successful. And we’re like family.’ Many are bolstered by the idea that they are engaged in important work – work that, if enough people paid attention, could improve the teaching profession and to some extent the nation itself. But stunningly, their work has gone almost unnoticed. Here are schools that are doing what some people insist cannot be done, and yet they are pretty much unknown.

“Early on in this project I was talking with a very thoughtful principal, Mary Russo, who has led great improvement in her school, Richard J. Murphy K-8 School in Boston. I said that many people think that schools cannot help children who are damaged by poverty and discrimination catch up to their more privileged peers. ‘They say it can’t be done,’ I said. She replied simply, ‘It’s being done.’ I spent the next two years proving her point and then stole her words as the title of this book.”

Reading With Phonics. Florence Barnes

The author spent a lifetime teaching primary and elementary grades in Manitoba. Since retirement, she has done some individual tutoring in beginning and remedial reading. Mrs. Barnes remembers far enough back to the days before the reading wars started – when teaching letters and sounds went without saying and parents could depend on the school system to teach their children to read. This book discusses reading methods and arguments for and against phonics, including stories about some of the children the author has tutored since retiring from teaching. Here is an excerpt which shows the author's frustration at the plight of many children since phonics teaching was eliminated.

Excerpt (pages 78-79)

“A year and a half ago Janet sat with me at the table and we began putting sounds together reading three-letter words with the short vowel sound of the letter ‘a’. This is not a difficult task, but time and patience are needed. We went on to the other short vowel sounds, the long vowel sounds, and combinations such as ‘ou’ and ‘aw’. Her practice included sentences and stories as well as single words. She now reads at the upper level of her third grade class and has no trouble with spelling. She can benefit more from what goes on in her class, whole language or not.”

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