

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 difficult passages or find the cube root of 4000. 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 students are not asked to write answers of more than a few words.

The PISA sponsors make it clear 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 don't take part in the PISA tests, by the way).

It's as if the Canadian kids were in a figure skating competition that tested only the ability to do bunny hops. Because the Canadian kids have been doing bunny hops for years and in fact are still doing them all the time, they can do them perfectly. Although the other kids in other countries are very fine skaters, they're a bit rusty at bunny hops because they haven't done them for so long.

Foreign skaters can do bunny hops of course, because they are very easy, but just at first the non-Canadian skaters are kind of rusty and awkward at it. As a result, the Canadian kids do fairly well in the contest. Of course, it would be a different story if the competition were based on the ability to do triple axels and forward camels!

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 [TIMSS](#) or the [PIRL](#). Ontario ranks roughly in the middle of the countries that choose to participate in these tests.

Of course, it is reassuring to learn that Canadian students are well prepared to meet the practical challenges of the future, but there is also value in ensuring that our children can read and write at advanced levels, and solve difficult mathematical problems.

After all, Canadian hairdressers and plumbers are not at much risk of losing their jobs to better-educated international competitors. Rather, it's professional jobs, like computer programming and call centre operators, that are most vulnerable to offshoring.

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.