

People do not properly, fully realize the impact that children have on each other sharing the same classrooms and schools. As learning deficits mount and accumulate through the years, a Grade Nine classroom can easily have students reading at widely divergent reading levels, as low as Grade 4 or less, with equally disparate mathematics skills and abilities. Inevitably, instruction must gear down to accommodate the less-able learners; inescapably, time and energies are diverted away from the more-able students. Instructional intentions get 'jammed up' and the whole 'train' must slow down. Expectations are scaled back such that all can "succeed." Deliberately or not, knowingly or not, assessment is accordingly constructed and conducted such that a majority of parents can still be assured that their children are "meeting—or "exceeding"(!)—expectations," will pass this grade without question, and will proceed on to graduate Grade 12 with grades sufficient to meet postsecondary requirements.

As long as schooling delivers, by whatever means, on its promise to effect entry into postsecondary education—and how could it not, given the adjustments postsecondary institutions inevitably make?—most parents will remain "content" with this, having been able to gain only a vague, piecemeal sense of the malaise in which their children have been immersed, not fully realizing the toll this subterfuge has taken on the skills and knowledge with which their children have emerged from 13 years of schooling.

"Progressive" educators in the Ministry of Education and school division offices, after stressing all the good things that truly do happen in schools—the opportunities for growth in all spheres that hard work does support—then assure the public that there are effective measures being implemented, or in the works, to address these "regrettable" problems carried over from a "less-enlightened" era of education. "Differentiated instruction" is a prime example, and a good thing. Teaching and assessment methods are to be "differentiated," or tailored, to match the different learning styles—e.g. visual, auditory, kinesthetic—ability levels—e.g. different degrees of cognitive

[As in America, so in Canada:]

In the United States, we have long regarded public schools as the great equalizer, providing all students with access to the same high-quality education regardless of their ethnicity, family background, or socioeconomic status. The ideal is that any student willing to work hard and take advantage of the opportunities schooling provides can go as far as his or her abilities allow.

Indeed, U.S. Society delights in the stories of those who triumph over adversity through their own talent and effort. Such stories affirm the myth of American individualism. Correspondingly, we view failure as the result of a lack of effort, talent, motivation, application, or perseverance. In the case of schooling, we assume that unequal achievement outcomes are not the result of unequal access to educational opportunities, but rather the result of an unequal distribution of individual abilities and ambition.

Is this assumption justified? Or is it simply a satisfying myth that eases the national conscience? (p. 44)

***The Myth of Equal Content***, Schmidt, William H. & Cogan, Leland S., Educational Leadership, November 2009 (67:3, 44-47).

impairment—and skill levels—e.g. reading and computation skills amenable to remediation, exhibited by learners who are to be focused upon inflexibly as individuals with unique abilities and needs.

The problem is that the higher you look in the K-12 system, the more learning deficits accumulate, the more instruction must be differentiated, and the wider the gap grows between the weakest and strongest students. Even the best of educators cannot truly “reach” that far, given the size of their classes, the number of students they see in a day, and the difficult impediments to learning they encounter in many students. Good educators try to do so anyway, simply because they are conscientious and recognize the needs of the students to whom their hearts easily go out. But they cannot work miracles, or at least, nearly enough of them. Their less-talented and perhaps motivationally-impaired colleagues simply do not, for all purposes, even try to do so in any material way, intimidated by the needs and challenges presenting before them. Feeling betrayed, and put in an impossible position, all sorts of defenses are erected, e.g. “That kid is just lazy; he doesn’t care and won’t ask for help or appreciate it when I give it to him” or “Her main problem is an ‘attitude’ one, and her parents don’t help at all.” These teachers settle into the position that their job is to faithfully stick to teaching, say, Middle Years English Language Arts (ELA), and find out who can do it, and who cannot. (Grades 7-9 ELA is selected only because ELA is a core subject at a key time; no specific teacher(s) should be considered the focus of this critique; problems noted cross all age and subject levels.) This intransigence is justified as maintaining “standards.” The pedagogical approach is much like that of a sports coach: Games have rules, and those who want to win play by the rules, demonstrate the right attitude, accept the coach’s instructions unquestioningly, and succeed or fail according to their abilities. (Much as there are elements of teaching in coaching, and coaching in teaching, teaching *is not* coaching.) Trouble is, many students aren’t “playing” ELA 8 because they want to; they have no choice in the matter. Nor are they on equal terms with their peers; schooling hasn’t worked well for them for as long as they remember; and they believe ‘this game’ is rigged’ against them. They are also still *kids*, early adolescent ones to boot: They can easily get bogged down in a host of problems and distractions. Worksheets and typical English Language Arts reading materials are not viewed in favorable terms; such “drudgery” (one big vocabulary word they do understand) is suffered only because they have to—and their “work,” and learning, suffer accordingly.

But this must be kept clear: This does not give aggrieved parents license to go into their local schools to confront teachers and administrators with “We thought so! You have been deceiving us, and we won’t stand for it anymore!” The predicament described here is what most educators recognize and will acknowledge privately—if they know this admission will remain “private” and will not come back to bite them personally. School divisions reflexively suppress and punish dissent; ‘troublemakers’ are given the clear message that if they know what is good for them, their only reply to the question “How do you like your job?” will be “Fine. I like my job just fine.” Principals and vice principals who show signs of not sticking to and selling “the party line” are baldly told that if they do not do so, they will no longer be administrators; and if their staff cause

trouble, they will be held accountable too. Put in such positions, seemingly interminably, without recourse, administrators ‘hunker down’ and reflexively steer clear of as much trouble and controversy as they can manage till they reach retirement and peace, leaving “the school wars” as far behind them as possible.

Critics and protesters are ridiculed and dismissed as ossified, grudge-holding (about amalgamation), reactionary malcontents who have to be stifled and controlled till they can be moved out. Educators in their work end up having to ultimately care decisively more about their own children (keeping jobs, making mortgage payments) and their own prospects (job assignments, advancements, pensions) than about the kids they teach. Doing what good they safely can before they too can escape into retirement becomes their only consolation, holding true to *some* measure of the ideals with which they came into the profession.

It is not in the immediate interests of a Division Office administrator to acknowledge the sources and degree of systemic problems. To begin with, he or she believes more than enough problems are presented already to deal with every day. All administrators also base their legitimacy and competence upon the aggressive assertion that “Things are good—good as could be expected—more than good enough—in my jurisdiction.” Otherwise, they would lay themselves open to suspicion of incompetence, and incur the wrath of their superiors, making trouble for them and bringing *their* legitimacy into question. And if honesty and awareness are not in the interests of superintendents and directors, then such qualities will certainly not be found in any of the Ministry potentates who have overseen this assault on Education in our province. The pressure for conformity and compliance is relentless and often ruthless from top to bottom in the school system.

The truth is, the educators in your local school are in general as much “victimized” and powerless to stop this as the children they teach. Other than on matters rooted in the usual basic issues—fairness, judgment, work ethic, basic competence—encountered in teaching and managing schools, your children’s teachers are not the ones to be challenged and held accountable here; the larger and more consequential issues undermining contemporary schooling are not their doing or fault: Teachers are not the problem. The higher up the educational and governmental hierarchy, the more culpable the officeholders are—and this is where criticism and demands should be focused. From your school board member through your MLA to the Premier (and Opposition counterparts)—and federal politicians, since cutbacks in transfers to the provinces have done much to undercut school funding—this is where the message must be delivered that *votes will no longer be obtained by anyone who does not honestly recognize these problems and sincerely, resolutely set the machinery in motion to address them.*

Those who challenge the resultant fudging of standards in assessment and grading, but insist on a return to evaluation reduced and crunched down to a single number, both sense the problem and miss the point. More and better assessment practices *are* needed that nevertheless legitimately can be combined to produce single *summative* measures of achievement, at least in key *content* domains of each subject. Fewer summative measures—but ones that are more

content-meaningful and mastery-focused—can and should be derived than newly-introduced evaluation methods allow. As well, not more assessment *of* learning, but rather, more assessment *for* learning will yield real benefits for children. Assessment for learning, with *formative* measures of learning, strives to design assessment methods that direct subsequent teaching to better address the deficits, and build upon the strengths, identified.

To the consternation of curriculum enthusiasts, *less* curriculum is needed, not more. That is, the lower one goes in the system, the more core, foundational competencies must be focused on—and the more we must insist that children stick with and master them before they are moved on to other topics and the next grade. (Grade levels themselves should become less relevant.) For those who master the core curriculum quickly, learning should be individualized to facilitate more enrichment and “personal interest” activities while their slower peers are catching up to them. *This additional achievement should be recognized and rewarded too.* Information technology—if better and properly utilized, still kept within its necessary confines, recognized for what it can and cannot do—could make this “differentiation” of instruction much more possible and fruitful.

Right now, we have an “assembly line” approach to education, one in which quality control is subordinated to quantity output. The student is on the track dragged through one grade after another; the line does not slow down, moving relentlessly till grade 10, or the age of 16, is reached. All the learning components curriculum can add, piece by piece, have their appointed time for placement. But if pieces do not get installed properly, the line keeps moving anyway, and while ‘workers’ are trying to fix a problem inherited from back up the line, they are also supposed to be installing another piece that might well require proper placement of the first one. No wonder kids come out of school who read and compute about as well as a car runs and steers constructed according to such principles and methods.

Make no mistake about this as well, no matter what politicians and compliant educational leaders tell you: Turning Education around *cannot* be accomplished with less teachers, educational assistants, and resource specialists. If anything we need more people trying to reach and teach these kids. And more computers and information technology will not be what makes the difference. *This is not where money must be spent.* Technology is a never-to-be-satiated hungry monster, escapist to students and teachers alike, easily and often misused.

*To focus on these problems is not to miss or ignore all of the many good things our public schools do manage to achieve* because of all the contributions, or despite the deficiencies thereof, from educational leaders, staff, parents, and students.

Parents, grandparents, and the public who recognize the crucial role schooling plays in determining the future prosperity of all our children, ourselves, our province, our country, and our planet must refuse to accept this “We can do more with less” rationalization for cutbacks and the continuous creeping erosion of Education. Nor should we accept anymore that we have no choice but to try to do so, that there are not sufficient resources in this province, and country, to educate our children properly, fairly, and well. *There are:* they are just hidden in

the hands of elitist people with other interests and loyalties, and the purchased political power, also hidden, to make public institutions serve their ambitions instead.

The real issue behind differences in student performance is unequal access to a high-quality, challenging curriculum. In multiple analyses conducted with international data across countries and with U.S. data across states and districts, we've demonstrated the significant relationship between classroom instruction and student achievement. Access to instructional content is always more strongly related to differences in student performance than are the student background factors often cited to explain such differences.

In the United States, we have a much better track record in ensuring uniform, equitable assessment than in ensuring uniform, equitable access to learning opportunities. Our current accountability and assessment system is disconnected from our plethora of content standards. We assume equality of content coverage and use assessments that are not curriculum sensitive, which then reveal unequal outcomes—leading many to believe that students who fail do so because of their own lack of effort, talent, and motivation.

Fixing this problem will require coordinated efforts among teachers, administrators, and education policy-makers. It will require creating challenging, clear content standards to guide classroom instruction and learning; creating curriculum-sensitive assessments that are specific to these standards; and measuring the actual content of classroom instruction. Without all three, we will never be able to address inequities in access or in student performance. (p. 47)

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"The significant relationship between classroom instruction and student achievement ... uniform, equitable access to learning opportunities ... to address inequities in access or in student performance": The equality of opportunity required for optimal and acceptable student achievement, here described in terms of delivery of "high-quality, challenging curriculum," also depends upon the adequate provision of programs appropriate to the individual—and, often, exceptional—learning needs of children, *that they might all truly access that curriculum equitably*.

Respectfully

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