

## NO CHILD LEFT THINKING:

### Democracy at Risk in Canada's Schools

THERE IS AN OLD PARABLE ABOUT A PASSERBY SEEING A MAN on his hands and knees searching the ground on a corner under a streetlight. "What are you looking for?" the passerby asks. Hunched over on his hands and knees, the man replies, "I've lost my car keys." The kind passerby immediately joins him in his search. After a few minutes searching without success, she asks the man whether he is sure he lost the keys there on the street corner. "No," he replies, pointing down the block, "I lost them over there." Indignant, the woman asks "Then why are you looking for them here?" The man replies, "Because there's light here."

Behind the onslaught of testing and so-called "accountability" measures of the last decade lurks the same perverse logic of the man looking for his keys. We know what matters to most teachers, parents, school administrators, board members, and policy-makers. But we are far less sure how to find out whether schools are successful in teaching what matters. Since we have relatively primitive ways of assessing students' abilities to think, create, question, analyze, form healthy relationships, and work in concert with others to improve their communities and the world, we turn instead to where the light is: standardized measures of students' abilities to decode sentences and solve mathematical problems. In other words, since we can't measure what we care about, we start to care about what we can measure.

Of course I am not being entirely fair. Educational testing enthusiasts do have some ways of measuring, for example, skills related to critical thinking. And the reading comprehension tests are evolving to consider not only whether students can understand the words and structure of a particular sentence or paragraph but also whether they can articulate something about its meaning and implications. But when researchers examine education policies broadly and the classroom practices and habits that follow those policies, it is becoming increasingly clear that our educational goals and the methods used to assess educational progress are suffering from an appalling lack of imagination. I titled this article "No Child Left Thinking" because for the past ten years I have been studying the effects of education initiatives such as the U.S. *No Child Left Behind* Act or the various provincial

testing and accountability policies in Canada and their impact on teachers' ability to teach critical thinking and students' ability to think and act critically.

My concern stems from what colleagues and I have found. Almost every school mission statement these days boasts broad goals related to critical thinking, global citizenship, environmental stewardship, and moral character. Yet beneath the rhetoric, increasingly narrow curriculum goals, accountability measures, and standardized testing have reduced too many classroom lessons to the cold, stark pursuit of information and skills without context and without social meaning – what education philosopher Maxine Greene calls “mean and repellent facts”.<sup>1</sup> It is not, as I will explain shortly, that facts are bad or that they should be ignored. But democratic societies require more than citizens who are fact-full. They require citizens who can think. If we are to take education's democratic goals seriously, then we need the kinds of classroom practices that teach students to recognize ambiguity and conflict in “factual” content, to see human conditions and aspirations as complex and contested, and to embrace debate and deliberation as cornerstones of democratic societies.

### WHAT GETS TESTED GETS TAUGHT

There's a saying among teachers: Everybody likes to teach critical thinking, but nobody wants a school full of critical thinkers. Current education reform indicates that policymakers are taking this tongue-in-cheek dictum far too seriously. Although provincial (and state) education rhetoric almost always touts the importance of critical thinking, the policies that actually affect classroom teaching run in the other direction. Because of a myopic focus on testing in math and literacy, it is becoming more and more difficult to make time for deep consideration of important ideas and controversies. Social studies scholar Stephen Thornton notes that by “critical thinking” school officials too often mean that students should passively absorb as “truth” the critical thinking already completed by someone else.<sup>2</sup> Students are being asked to become proficient in adding numbers, but not at thinking about how the answers add up to.

In the United States, whole subject areas – in particular those that tend to embrace multiple perspectives and complex narratives – have been virtually eliminated from the class schedules of many students. In the wake of *No Child Left Behind* legislation, seventy-one percent of U.S. school districts reported cutting back time from, or eliminating altogether, subjects like social studies, the arts, and even science to make more space for reading and math test preparation.<sup>3</sup> In Canada, a retreat from in-depth problem-based learning, from science, history, and the arts, and even from recess are evident in school boards in almost every province (there are exceptions such as Prince Edward Island and Manitoba, which have, for the most part, resisted the onslaught of over-testing). Indeed, concern over restrictions on the kind of knowledge being taught to children is evident not only among teachers but also from a growing number of school principals. The Canadian Principals Association went to the unusual step of issuing a “statement of concern” regarding student testing and its impact on thinking and learning. School-based administrators throughout Canada, they wrote, “are increasingly concerned that current policies and practices on student testing are leading to...a secretive or unintended shift of priorities to focus on a narrow range of student knowledge and literacy/numeracy skills.”<sup>4</sup>

Have provincial policies, boards, or individual schools forbidden teachers to teach other subject areas or to encourage



students to critically examine ideas in deep and meaningful ways? No. But a plain fact – one that every teacher, student, and school principal knows – seems to elude most proponents of a test-based curriculum. As Jack Jennings, CEO of the Washington D.C.-based Center on Education Policy, notes:

*What gets tested gets taught. Under No Child Left Behind [and he could be talking about EQAO testing in Ontario or British Columbia's FSA, or testing elsewhere across Canada], there is reading and math and then there is everything else. And because there is so much riding on the reading and math included on state tests, many schools have cut back time on other important subject areas, which means that some students are not receiving a broad curriculum.*<sup>5</sup>

To the extent that a broad curriculum continues to be taught in Canada, in-depth thinking, in particular, has been greatly circumscribed. Moreover, the culture of assessment that results from standardized testing in reading and math rapidly tends to spread to other subject areas as well. An English teacher in an urban high school told me that even novel reading was now prescriptive in her school's rubric: meanings predetermined, vocabulary words pre-selected, and essay topics predigested. An American science teacher put it this way: “The only part of the science curriculum now being critically analyzed is evolution.”<sup>6</sup>

### DE-PROFESSIONALIZATION OF TEACHING MEANS STUDENTS ARE “TOO BUSY TO THINK”

Although ideological battles over the school curriculum still exist in most states and provinces, many teachers are experiencing a more insidious cause for erosion of their ability to teach students how to think. Rather than the legislative elimination of valuable educational goals, teachers and administrators face pressure to drop many of them to make room for test preparation. John Holt may have been the most prescient forecaster of this phenomenon. In his classic 1964 text, *How Children Fail*, he wrote that the most significant outcome of the drive for “so-called higher standards in schools is that the children are too busy to think.” Teachers have to sacrifice social studies, science, arts, and in-depth analysis of topics in virtually every subject to be able to fit literacy and math drills into the schedule.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps the most common complaint I hear from both teachers and administrators in this climate is that they have been stripped of their professional judgment and ability to make decisions in the best interests of the students who populate their classrooms and schools. De-professionalization of teachers is nothing new. Historically, since education – especially in the primary years – was a women's profession, teachers were bound by strict guidelines not only on what they should teach but also how they should teach it, what they should wear, and how they were to conduct themselves even outside of the classroom on their own time. What is surprising today is the newfound hypocrisy: “teacher

**EN BREF** Bien que la rhétorique provinciale sur l'éducation insiste presque toujours sur l'importance de la réflexion critique, une concentration aveugle sur les tests de mathématiques et de littérature fait qu'il devient de plus en plus difficile pour les enseignants de trouver le temps d'approfondir des idées importantes. Les détracteurs soutiennent que ceux qui font valoir la réflexion critique dévalorisent l'apprentissage de la lecture, de l'écriture et des mathématiques par les élèves. C'est absurde. Même s'il existe d'immenses bases de données, s'en tenir uniquement à ces données représente un bien mince objectif à viser en éducation. Accorder une importance exagérée aux évaluations normalisées dans un éventail étroit de matières mène non seulement à un programme d'enseignement intellectuellement émacié, mais aussi à un virage culturel où il devient difficile d'évaluer tout ce que ces tests ne mesurent pas. Les démocraties dépendent de la multiplicité des idées et il appartient aux citoyens, aux médias et aux écoles d'en protéger l'expression.

**Somehow critics have become convinced that those who say they want students to think for themselves simply do not care whether students can read, write, or perform addition or subtraction. This is plainly nonsense.**

factual knowledge without necessarily gaining the inclination or the conviction required to participate.<sup>8</sup> In fact, we found that often it worked the other way around: participation led to the quest for knowledge. Once students gained experiences in asking difficult and complex questions about their community, their province, their country, or the world, they sought out the facts they needed for evidence.

### THE TEST SCORE THAT ATE HUMANITY

As I indicated earlier, overemphasizing standardized assessments in a narrow band of subjects can lead to an intellectually emaciated curriculum. But it can also lead to a cultural shift in which it becomes difficult to value anything at all that the tests do not measure. When activities other than mathematics and literacy instruction remain part of the school experience, they now have to be justified by being linked to better test scores. Arts? Maybe, if there's time and money left after test-prep or if it can be demonstrated that participating in the arts raises mathematical literacy or literary prowess. Recess? Just enough so children can concentrate better on mathematics and reading instruction (sometimes recess is cut altogether – in particular for those students who are not performing well on the tests). Most readers will be able to name five or six activities that have either been curtailed or have had their mission statements refashioned so that they can be justified by citing evidence that engaging in these activities leads to better test scores.

One example of this shift stands out beyond what might have been imaginable a decade ago. The quite excellent Ottawa School Breakfast Program provides 8,000 Ottawa schoolchildren breakfast each morning. Wonderfully committed volunteers and employees work for the Breakfast Program. What caught my attention was the Q & A section of their website. Question #2 reads as follows: "Why is it important to feed children who are hungry?" That this question has to be asked is evidence enough for the point I am trying to make here, but the answer takes away any doubt about the need for educational programs to mold themselves in the image of test score improvement mechanisms:

*Children who arrive at school hungry do not perform well in the classroom. Numerous studies have shown that students who are fed are more alert, develop greater self-esteem, have better attendance and fewer discipline problems. Children who receive a healthy, nutritious head start to the day show a marked improvement in academic achievement.<sup>9</sup>*

Feeding hungry children leads to better performance in school. In other words, it is not enough to feed children because they don't have enough food to eat and are hungry. (I will resist temptation to comment on those researchers apparently studying children to find out whether alertness

professionalism" rhetoric co-exists with top-down edicts that strip teachers of exactly the curricular and pedagogical decision-making authority that allow them to act as professionals. The new Ontario late-assignment policy, in which teachers are forbidden to penalize students no matter when they hand in an assignment (possibly reasonable in select cases and patently absurd as an applies-to-all directive), is only the latest and most peculiar example of this trend. But as more and more ministries of education and their school boards restrict the discretion allowed to teachers to make decisions on how to open the minds of individual students in a highly diverse student body, the more far-reaching and troublesome mandated standardized testing becomes.

### JUST THE FACTS

The most common critique of educators who seek to teach students to think and to interpret information – skills and habits essential for citizens of any democratic nation – is that they have no respect for facts. They are soft, feel-good pedagogues more interested in process than in knowing the right answers to questions. These tendencies are vilified as unfit for a rigorous standards-based education. Somehow critics have become convinced that those who say they want students to think for themselves simply do not care whether students can read, write, or perform addition or subtraction. This is plainly nonsense. We all want students to learn to read and write. Nobody wants students to be numerically illiterate. When I speak to groups of educators, policymakers, politicians, or advocacy groups, I sometimes ask whether anyone present has been recruited to join the group called "Teachers Against Kids Learning How to Add" or "School Principals in Support of Illiteracy". You should not be surprised that I have not once found anyone aware of these or any similar groups. What I have found is countless educators and parents who want children to know *more than* formulas. They want the knowledge that students acquire to be embedded in the service of something bigger. It is not enough for children to learn how to read; they also have to learn to know what is worth reading and why. In other words, they need to learn how to think.

Teaching students to think will require reclaiming common assumptions about what thinking requires. There are few educators who believe that facts are unimportant components of a proper education. But at a time when vast databases of information are at our fingertips in seconds, facts alone represent a profoundly impoverished goal for educational achievement. Furthermore, students tend to learn more "facts" through thoughtful participation in meaningful projects of concern, but engagement in such projects of democratic importance is rarely driven by the acquisition of facts only. In short, knowledge does not necessarily lead to thoughtful participation. In many of the programs colleagues and I have studied that emphasize teaching about the workings of democratic government, legislative procedures, elections, and so on, students gained solid

and food deprivation are inversely related because I worry about the control group in these studies.) Rather, gaining public and governmental support for such a program requires evidence that it will help children pass the test.

### DEMOCRATIC THINKING REQUIRES THE PURSUIT OF MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

Much as Darwin's theory of natural selection depends on genetic variation, any theory of democracy depends on a multiplicity of ideas. It is the responsibility of the citizenry, the media, and the schools to safeguard the expression of those ideas. Schools have particular responsibilities in this regard. Healthy critical analysis is one hallmark of a mature democracy, and educators have a responsibility to create learning environments that help to realize these ideals. There are many varied and powerful ways to teach children and young adults to engage critically – to think about social policy issues, participate in authentic debate over matters of importance, and understand that intelligent adults can have different opinions. Indeed democratic progress depends on these differences. If education policymakers, teachers, and administrators in Canada and elsewhere in the world hope to contribute to students' democratic potential, they must resist the narrowing of the curriculum. And many do. In every province there are examples of individual teachers, schools, and sometimes boards that work creatively and diligently to keep their students thinking.

In Vancouver, a schoolteacher engages her students in real-world problems with no easy answers. She has them conduct research on a community issue of their choosing and seeds their choice throughout the curriculum in every subject area. In London, Ontario, a principal meets with teachers monthly to brainstorm on ways to fulfill provincial mandates without shortchanging students on the curriculum options they deserve. Every province (and U.S. state) has such examples. Approaches like these that aim to promote a "thinking curriculum" for both teachers and students share several characteristics. First, teachers encourage students to ask questions rather than absorb pat answers – to think about

their attachments and commitments to their local, national, and global communities. Second, teachers provide students with the information (including competing perspectives) they need to think about subject matter in substantive ways. Third, they root instruction in local contexts, working within their own specific surroundings and circumstances because it is not possible to teach democratic forms of thinking without providing an environment to think about. This last point makes provincially standardized tests (especially in large provinces with both rural and urban settings) difficult to reconcile with in-depth critical thinking about issues that matter.

There are many strategies available to help our students learn to think for themselves. I will conclude with one final comment about the parable that opened this article. Although, of course, shining a spotlight in an area where one did not lose one's keys is not likely to uncover the missing keys, the effects are actually worse than that. When we illuminate one area, we simultaneously darken anything outside the circle of light. If you have ever walked with a flashlight, you will recognize your blindness to anything beyond the light. If the man and woman in the story shifted their gaze from beneath the streetlight to where the keys actually lay, they would likely be blinded (at least at first) in the newfound darkness – darker seeming than if they had not been staring in the light for so long. It is the same with our illuminated spotlight on mathematics and literacy testing. The first step to drawing attention to the broader walk in the woods might be to soften the focus of the light that now shines so relentlessly bright. |


**DR. JOEL WESTHEIMER** is University Research Chair in the Sociology of Education at the University of Ottawa and winner of the 2009 CEA Whitworth Award for Educational Research. His most recent book is *Pledging Allegiance: The Politics of Patriotism in America's Schools* (Teachers College Press).

#### Notes

- 1 Maxine Greene credits John Dewey with reminding us that "facts are mean and repellent things until we use imagination to open intellectual possibilities." From "Jagged Landscapes to Possibility," *Journal of Educational Controversy* 1, no.1 (Winter 2006): 1.
- 2 Steven Thornton, in *Educating Citizens for Global Awareness*, ed. Nel Noddings (New York: Teachers College Press, 2005), 85.
- 3 D.S. Rentner, C. Scott, N. Kober, N. Chudowsky, V. Chudowsky, S. Jofus, and D. Zabala, *From the Capital to the Classroom: Year 4 of the No Child Left Behind Act* (Washington, DC: Center on Education Policy, 2006).
- 4 Canadian Association of Principals. *Valid Uses of Student Testing as part of Authentic, Comprehensive Student Assessment – A Statement of Concern from Canada's School Principals*, March 9, 2007. [www.cdnprincipals.org/CAP\\_Position\\_on\\_Student\\_Testing-Version1.doc](http://www.cdnprincipals.org/CAP_Position_on_Student_Testing-Version1.doc)
- 5 *Choices, Changes, and Challenges: Curriculum and Instruction in the NCLB Era* (Center on Education Policy, 2007).
- 6 Personal communication.
- 7 See, for example, Barbara Knighton, "No Child Left Behind: The Impact on Social Studies Classrooms," *Social Education* 67 (2003).
- 8 See for example, K. Llewellyn & J. Westheimer, "Beyond Facts and Acts: The Implications of 'Ordinary Politics' for Youth Political Engagement," *Citizenship Teaching and Learning* 5, no.2 (2009): 50-61.
- 9 [www.ottawaschoolbreakfastprogram.ca/faq2.asp](http://www.ottawaschoolbreakfastprogram.ca/faq2.asp)

You are free to reproduce, distribute and transmit this article, provided you attribute the author(s), Education Canada Vol. 50 (2), and a link to the Canadian Education Association ([www.cea-ace.ca](http://www.cea-ace.ca)) 2010. You may not use this work for commercial purposes. You may not alter, transform, or build upon this work. Publication ISSN 0013-1253.

**Parliament of Canada**



Ottawa, October 31 to November 5, 2010

## TEACHERS INSTITUTE

**ON CANADIAN PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY**

Experience a week on Parliament Hill!

- ▶ 70 participants selected from across Canada
- ▶ All grade levels
- ▶ Most costs covered
- ▶ Bursaries available

**APPLICATION DEADLINE:**  
**APRIL 30, 2010**

**[www.parl.gc.ca/teachers](http://www.parl.gc.ca/teachers)**


613-922-4793 or 1 866 599-4999

---

**[www.parl.gc.ca/education](http://www.parl.gc.ca/education)**

**Educational Programming and Products**

The Parliament of Canada has free educational resources available for your use.



- ▶ On-line and downloadable
- ▶ Tailored for all levels of instruction
- ▶ Class sets and Teacher Kits available

Renseignements disponibles en français.

CANADA